Contents

Cover
About the Author
List of Illustrations
Map of Revolutionary Paris
Chronology
Dedication
Title Page
Preface
Introduction
Part I: Before the Revolution (1758–1788)

1. Child of Arras
2. The Lawyer-Poet Back Home

Part II: The Revolution Begins (1788–1789)

3. Standing for Election in Arras
4. Representing the Nation at Versailles
Part III: Reconstituting France (1789–1791)
  5. The National Assembly in Paris
  6. The Constitution

Part IV: The Constitution Fails (1791–1792)
  7. War
  8. The King’s Trial

Part V: The Terror (1793–1794)
9. The Pact with Violence
10. Robespierre’s Red Summer

Coda
Picture Section
Notes
Acknowledgements
Bibliography
Index
Copyright
About the Author

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book.
List of Illustrations

Maps
1. Revolutionary Paris, drawn by Edward Weller, 1908

Black and white pictures
1. Antoine François Callet, Louis XVI in Coronation Robes, 1788 (Musée Bargoin,
2. Arras in the mid-eighteenth century (by permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library)


4. Pierre Roch Vigneron, *Maximilien de Robespierre*, 1791 (Château de Versailles:

6. The Procession of the Opening of the Estates General at Versailles (Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris: Bridgeman)

7. The Tennis Court Oath, 20 June 1789 (Private Collection: Bridgeman)
8. The Siege of the Bastille, 14 July 1789 (Musée du Louvre, Paris: Bridgeman)


10. Robespierre in his room at the Duplays. Artist unknown (Buffenoir, Portraits)

11. Bronze medallion of Robespierre, by Joseph

13. Eléonore Duplay, pastel self-portrait (Buffenoir, Portraits)

14. The Execution of Louis XVI, 21 January 1793 (Musée de la Révolution)
Colour pictures

1. Map of France, showing the 83 departments created in 1790 (Musée de la Révolution Française, Vizille: Bridgeman)

2. Louis Lafitte: *The Months of the Revolutionary Calendar*, engraving by
Tresca, c. 1794. Vendémiaire, Brumaire, Frimaire, Nivôse, Pluviôse, Ventôse, Germinal, Floréal, Prairial, Messidor, Thermidor, Fructidor (Musée de la Ville de Paris, Musée Carnavalet, Paris: Bridgeman)

3. Robespierre at the Tribune (Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)

4. Playing card depicting Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1793
5. ‘All mortals are born equal, it is virtue that makes the difference.’ Engraving, 1793 (Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris: Bridgeman)

6. Jacques-Louis David, Camille Desmoulins, his wife Lucile and their son Horace-Camille, c.1792 (Château de Versailles: Bridgeman)
7. Jean François Garneray, Jean Paul Marat (Musée Lambinet, Versailles: Bridgeman)


9. Pierre Alexandre Wille, Danton on his way to execution, 1794 (Musée de la Ville de Paris, Musée
10. *The Festival of the Supreme Being, 8 July 1794*: ‘The Statue of Atheism being destroyed and replaced with the Statue of Wisdom’ (Musée de la Ville de Paris, Musée Carnavalet, Paris: Bridgeman)

12. Robespierre in the Convention, 9 Thermidor, pen and ink sketch by P. Grandmaison (Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)

13. Robespierre lying injured in the antechamber of the Committee of Public Safety (Musée de la Ville de Paris, Musée Carnavalet, Paris: Bridgeman)

14. Robespierre’s insurrectionary summons to
the Section des Piques to join the Commune, 9 Thermidor (Musée de la Ville de Paris, Musée Carnavalet, Paris: Bridgeman)
Chronology
1758 Maximilien Marie Isidore de Robespierre born in Arras, 6 May

1763 End of the Seven Years War

1764 Death of Robespierre's mother, 14 July

1769 Robespierre goes to boarding school in Paris at the Collège Louis-le-Grand

1772 Disappearance of Robespierre's father

1774 Death of Louis XV and accession of his grandson as Louis XVI

1775 Coronation of Louis XVI in the cathedral at Reims, 11 June

1778 France supports the American war of independence

1781 Robespierre returns to Arras to practise law

1788 The Lamoignon Edicts fail, May
Louis XVI agrees to the convocation of the Estates General, August
1789
Robespierre campaigns for election and is chosen as a representative of the Third Estate, April
The Estates General meet in Versailles, May
The Third Estate claims the right to represent the nation and renames itself the National Assembly, 17 June
Tennis Court Oath, 20 June
Storming of the Bastille, 14 July
Abolition of feudal rights and privileges, 4 August
Louis XVI and the National Assembly move from Versailles to Paris, October
Robespierre rents rooms in the rue Saintonge
The Jacobin Club established in Paris

1790
Proliferation of a network of political clubs throughout France affiliated to the Parisian Jacobin Club
Threat of war over Nootka Sound
Civil Constitution of the Clergy, July
Festival of Federation on the first anniversary of the Bastille's fall, 14 July

1791
Death of Mirabeau, 2 April
Pope Pius VI condemns the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, 13 April
Royal family's flight to Varennes, 20 June
Massacre on the Champ de Mars, 17 July
Robespierre moves to new lodgings in the rue Saint-Honoré
The Jacobin Club splits and moderate members leave to establish the Feuillant Club
Louis XVI accepts the new constitution, September
National Assembly closes and Robespierre revisits Arras
Pétion becomes mayor of Paris, 14 November
Robespierre returns to Paris and opposes war-mongering at the Jacobin Club, 28 November

1792
Fall of Louis XVI's Feuillant ministry and appointment of friends and associates of pro-war leader Brissot
Death of Holy Roman Emperor Leopold II, 1 March
Festival in honour of the Châteauvieux soldiers, 15 April
France declares war on Francis II (Leopold II's son and successor as Holy Roman emperor), 20 April
The guillotine is used for the first time, 25 April
Prussia joins Austria in the war against France, 13 June
The Duke of Brunswick issues a manifesto threatening Paris if Louis XVI is harmed, 25 July
Paris's 48 Sections declared in permanent session, 27 July
Fall of the monarchy, 10 August
Robespierre elected to municipal Commune governing Paris, 12 August
General Lafayette flees France
Longwy falls to Prussia, 20 August
Establishment of the first Revolutionary Tribunal
Verdun falls to Prussia, 2 September
Prison massacres, 2–6 September
Robespierre elected to new National Convention, 5 September
French victory over Prussia at battle of Valmy, 20 September
National Convention meets in Paris, 21 September
Declaration of the Republic, 22 September
French victory at battle of Jemappes, 6 November
Trial of Louis XVI, beginning with his indictment, 11 December
Dissolution of the first Revolutionary Tribunal

1793
Execution of Louis XVI, 21 January
France declares war on England and the Dutch Republic, February
Enragés food riots
France declares war on Spain, 7 March
Revolt in the Vendée
Failed insurrection in Paris, 9–10 March
Establishment of the second and infamous Revolutionary Tribunal, 10 March
Defection of General Dumouriez after battle of Neerwinden, 18 March
Establishment of the Committee of Public Safety, 6 April
Revolt in Lyon, May
Insurrection in Paris, 31 May
Expulsion of Girondin deputies from the National Convention, 2 June
Jacobin Republican constitution accepted by referendum and adopted, 24 June
Danton voted off Committee of Public Safety, 10 July
Marat assassinated, 13 July
Robespierre voted on to the Committee of Public Safety, 27 July
Siege of Lyon begins, 8 August
Smashing of royal tombs at Saint-Denis, 10 August
Toulon surrenders to the English, 29 August
Terror becomes the order of the day, 5 September
Law of Suspects, 17 September
Law of General Maximum, 29 September
Adoption of the Republican calendar (backdated to 22 September 1792), 5 October

Year I
Fall of Lyon, 18 Vendémiaire (9 October)
Execution of Marie Antoinette, 25 Vendémiaire (16 October)
Execution of the Girondin deputies, 10 Brumaire (31 October)
Festival of Reason in Notre-Dame, Paris, 20 Brumaire (10 November)
Commune decrees closure of Parisian churches, 3 Frimaire (23 November)
Constitution of Revolutionary Government, 14 Frimaire (4 December)
First issue of Desmoulins' Le Vieux Cordelier, 15 Frimaire (5 December)
French recapture Toulon, 29 Frimaire (19 December)
Rebels in the Vendée crushed, 2 Nivôse (22 December)

Year II
Robespierre ill, 22 Pluviôse–22 Ventôse (10 February–12 March)
Execution of Hébertists, 4 Germinal (24 March)
Recall of Fouche from Lyon, 7 Germinal (27 March)
Execution of Dantonists, 16 Germinal (5 April)
Robespierre runs the Police Bureau after Saint-Just leaves on mission to the army, 9 Floréal (28 April)
Cécile Renault attempts to assassinate Robespierre, 4 Prairial (27 May)
Festival of the Supreme Being, 20 Prairial (8 June)
Reorganisation of Revolutionary Tribunal, 22 Prairial (10 June)
French victory at battle of Fleurus, 8 Messidor (26 June)
Fraternal banquets to celebrate the anniversary of the Bastille’s fall, 26 Messidor (14 July)
Robespierre’s last speech to the National Convention, 8 Thermidor (26 July)
Arrest of Robespierre, 9 Thermidor (27 July)
Execution of Robespierists, 10 Thermidor (28 July)
To John
Fatal Purity
Robespierre and the French Revolution
Death is the beginning of immortality.

(Robespierre’s last speech, 26 July 1794)
MY DEAR CROKEER,
I wish you would think seriously of the History of the Reign of Terror. I do not
mean a pompous, philosophical history, but a mixture of biography, facts and gossip: a diary of what really took place with the best authenticated likenesses of the actors. (…)

Ever yours,

ROBERT PEEL (1835)
Soon after he received this letter from his friend Sir Robert Peel, the once and future Tory prime minister, whom he had known for many years, John Wilson Croker packed his bags for a seaside holiday. Although he was a prominent literary and political journalist and was hoping to work as he sat on the beach, Croker took with him none of his collection of
rare and fascinating books about the French Revolution that is now one of the glories of the British Library, only the list of those condemned to death during the Reign of Terror. He perused it against the rhythmic sound of waves breaking on the shore.

Twenty-two impoverished women, many of
them widows, convicted of forwarding ‘the designs of the fanatics, aristocrats, priests and other agents of England’, guillotined.

Nine private soldiers convicted of ‘pricking their own eyes with pins, and becoming by
this cowardly artifice unable to bear arms’, guillotined.

— Jean Baptiste Henry, aged 18, journeyman tailor, convicted of sawing down a tree of liberty, guillotined.

— Henrietta Frances de Marbœuf, aged
55, convicted of hoping for the arrival in Paris of the Austrian and Prussian armies, and of hoarding provisions for them, guillotined.

– James Duchesne, aged 60, formerly a servant, since a broker; John Sauvage, aged 34,
gunsmith; Frances Loizelier, aged 47, milliner; Mélanie Cunosse, aged 21, milliner; Mary Magdalen Virolle, aged 25, hairdresser: all convicted for writing, guillotined.

– Geneviève Gouvon, aged 77, seamstress,
convicted of ‘various conspiracies since the beginning of the Revolution’, guillotined.

– Francis Bertrand, aged 37, convicted of producing ‘sour wine injurious to the health of citizens’, guillotined.
– Mary Angelica Plaisant, another seamstress, guillotined for exclaiming, ‘A fig for the nation!’

Relaxing into his holiday, Croker continued reading through the long list of dubious charges against the several thousand victims of the Revolutionary Tribunal of Paris, from its institution on
10 March 1793 until the fall of Maximilien Robespierre on 27 July 1794. He compiled some grimly fascinating statistics: in the last five months of Robespierre’s life, when he supposedly secured tyrannous power over France and the Revolution, 2,217 people were guillotined in Paris; but the total condemned to death in the eleven months preceding
Robespierre’s personal Reign of Terror was only 399. On the basis of these statistics, Croker concluded that the executions ‘grew gradually with the personal influence of Robespierre, and became enormous in proportion as he successively extinguished his rivals’. In awed horror he recalled, ‘These things happened in our time – thousands are still living who
saw them, yet it seems almost incredible that *batches* (fournées – such was the familiar phrase) – of *sixty* victims should be condemned in one morning by the same tribunal, and executed the same afternoon on the same scaffold.’

Although Peel pressed his friend to write a popular and accessible book about the French Revolution, Croker
never did so. When he got back from his holiday in 1835 he published his seaside musings in an article for The Quarterly Review. Here he acknowledged the enormity of the problem Robespierre still poses biographers: ‘The blood-red mist by which his last years were enveloped magnified his form, but obscured his features. Like the Genius of the Arabian
tale, he emerged suddenly from a petty space into enormous power and gigantic size, and as suddenly vanished, leaving behind him no trace but terror."
No backdrop can match the French Revolution. It teems with life and burns with human, historical, intellectual and literary interest. More than haunting, it obsesses,
because it will not lie down and die. When François Furet, its most famous French historian of recent years, proclaimed in 1978: ‘The French Revolution is over,’ he provoked great waves of revisionist scholarship across France, beyond the Channel and on the other side of the Atlantic proving that it was still alive. With the Revolution’s bicentenary in
1989, and the collapse of communism across Europe the same year, this new scholarship brought a young generation face to face with the vivid hopes of 1789 – liberty, equality, fraternity, popular sovereignty, representative democracy, rights and happiness. Hopes that issued, after just four years, in the Terror: the system of emergency
government and summary execution with which no one was more closely identified than Maximilien Robespierre. A pale and fragile man, Robespierre was anxious, hesitant and principled. Before the Revolution he earned his living as a young lawyer in the city of Arras, in the province of Artois in northern France. He sided consistently with the
victimised and fiercely opposed the death penalty. Eloquent in person and on paper, but in a restrained and formal manner, he crossed a great deal out, nervously perfecting his prose, and had difficulty projecting his voice in public. His appearance was meticulously unflamboyant. His eyes were weak, his mind sometimes vague and his routines colourlessly orderly.
He should have drowned in the Revolution’s flood of epoch-shattering events and personalities. Instead, Robespierre became the living embodiment of the Revolution at its most feral and justified the Terror as an emanation of republican virtue, a necessary step on the path to the ideal society that he was determined to establish in France. However
hopelessly utopian, politically misguided or historically premature. Robespierre’s vision of this ideal society may have been, he made a unique contribution to events that shaped the future of Europe. To understand him is to begin to understand the French Revolution. It is also to cast light on the uneasy coincidence of democracy and fanaticism present at the
birth of modern European politics.

Political turmoil can foster unlikely leaders. The mediocre figure strutting and fretting on the historical stage in the midst of a revolution is always more riveting than the one who merely inherits power or gets elected to it in quieter times. But Robespierre’s mediocrity is only incidental: a weapon –
of sorts – in the hands of his detractors and enemies, but never the key to the personal and historical mystery that shrouds him. There were more intellectually gifted revolutionaries. There were better writers and speakers, and more sympathetic characters. Many disagreed politically with Robespierre every step of the way, from his election to the Estates
General on the eve of the Revolution in 1789, to his death beneath the guillotine in 1794 – often with good reason. But he cannot be explained by what he lacked, or failed to see and do.

Robespierre’s private self and his public contribution to the events that inaugurated modern European politics are complex – by all accounts he was remarkably odd, and the
French Revolution was spectacularly complicated. No sooner were his severed remains collected, tossed into an unmarked grave and covered with quicklime than the struggle began to grasp the connection between Robespierre’s personality and his role in the Revolution. While his short career in politics was long enough to win him a lasting place in
world history, it was not long enough to show conclusively whether his is rightly a place of honour, one of shame, or something more inscrutable in between.

To his enemies – living and dead – he will always be coloured blood red: the first of the modern dictators, the inventor and perpetrator of the Terror who sent thousands to their deaths. One
enemy, lucky enough to survive him, predicted:

History will say little about this monster; it will confine itself to these words: ‘At this time, the internal debasement of France was such that a bloodthirsty charlatan, without talent and without courage,
called Robespierre, made all the citizens tremble under his tyranny. Whilst twelve hundred thousand warriors were shedding their blood on the frontiers for the republic, he brought her to her knees by his proscriptions.’
Vilification and belittlement were inevitable in the aftermath of the Terror, but ‘bloodthirsty charlatan’ is hardly a satisfactory description of the fastidious lawyer who opposed the death penalty before the Revolution, and afterwards became France’s most articulate pacifist when war loomed with the rest of Europe. On the other hand,
the subtler shades with which his friends paint him – reserved, enigmatic, highly principled, the first of the modern democrats – do not suffice either. To them he was an unjustly maligned prophet of the political order of the future. Almost fifty years after his death, one of them wrote: ‘I would have given my life to save Robespierre, whom I loved
like a brother. No one knows better than I do how sincere, disinterested, and absolute his devotion to the Republic was. He has become the scapegoat of the revolutionists; but he was the best man of them all.’² A sympathetic biographer went so far as to insist: ‘The more godlike I prove Robespierre’s conduct to have been – the greater will be the horror in which
his memory will be held by the upper and middle classes.'

By the left in France and elsewhere, Robespierre has been cast primarily as the defender of the Republic and the ideal of social democracy: a passionate witness to the grievances of the poor and the virtues of the meek or oppressed whom history betrays. He was, after all, the
revolutionary who tried to change the Declaration of Rights to limit private property and enshrine the right to life and subsistence for all. It was Robespierre who said, ‘When will the people be educated? When they have enough bread to eat, when the rich and the government stop bribing treacherous pens and tongues to deceive them …’ When will
But whatever the view, Robespierre’s self and the Revolution cannot be separated. It is not only historians, hostile or sympathetic, that insist on their identity. He claimed himself to represent the pure republic of virtue, and even his adversaries recognised the aptness of the sobriquet ‘incorruptible’. (‘He would
have paid someone to offer him gold, so as to be able to say that he had refused it,’ one of them sneered.) His identification with the Revolution grew only closer as the Terror intensified. When Robespierre unveiled a new and perfect religion, the Cult of the Supreme Being, at the public festival of the same name, he assumed the central symbolic role of high priest.
Two days later he initiated the infamous Law of Prairial that precluded any possible defence before the Revolutionary Tribunal. Summary execution was the order of the day: Robespierre and the Republic became one and the same tyrant. When exactly did the lawyer from Arras begin to believe in the image that the Revolution reflected back to him? Why
did that image become so dangerously hypnotic, for him personally, his contemporaries and posterity? And why is it so hard to break the spell, to understand — perhaps imperfectly, but at least clearly — who Robespierre was and what he meant?

*Fatal Purity* attempts to answer these questions. It expresses neither partisan
adulation nor exaggerated animosity; instead it is motivated by the open-minded interest Robespierre deserves. It tries, whenever possible, to give him the benefit of any rational doubt. Though Robespierre died over two hundred years ago, he still makes new friends and enemies among the living. I have tried to be his friend and to see things from
his point of view. But friends, as he always suspected, can be treacherous; they have opportunities for betrayal that enemies only dream of.

As far as it goes, the evidence about Robespierre’s life is a mass of personal, political, historical and literary detail, some robust, some not, to be arranged on either side of the
argument, for or against: you can tell the story one way, or you can tell it another, as any lawyer knows. The real challenge of explaining him arises not from any paucity of facts, but from something deeper – a question of interpretation that reaches down to the roots of modern democratic politics. In 1941 one historian pleaded for a truce: ‘Robespierists, anti-
Robespierristes, we’ve had enough. We say, for pity’s sake, simply tell us what Robespierre was really like.’ This is easier said than done.

His astonishing story begins very slowly, deep in the provinces of eighteenth-century France, and only starts to pick up speed with the coming of the Revolution in 1789. Then it accelerates, like the Revolution itself,
tearing wildly through ever more frightening personal and political dramas, to end abruptly beneath the guillotine, one warm day in July 1794. The rhythm of his life is a violent crescendo and its shape is extremely lopsided. He was thirty-six when he died. Volume upon volume has been written about his last five years – astounding times by anyone’s
standard – but little is known about his first thirty-one years, except that they were less than remarkable.

The town of Robespierre’s birth and ancestry offers little to balance this deficit. Wandering quiet streets and buildings dignified by the sense that their time has come and gone, one looks in vain for an image of Arras’s most
famous citizen, born there on 6 May 1758. There are no pictures of Robespierre in the shops, none in the public library; none even in the Maison Robespierre, identified as the house he lived in as a young lawyer from 1787 to 1789 by a discreet plaque outside the door. This rather prim stone house in the former rue des Rapporteurs (now the rue
Robespierre), with its narrow shuttered windows and tall sloping roof, has been altered over the years, but is still typical of those built during Arras’s eighteenth-century boom. Robespierre only rented it; he never owned a house of his own. Inside the door, finally, there is a large bust of him, but no reproductions of it to take away; and it seems
inconceivable that anyone might be so indiscreet as to pull out a camera and use it.

The sense that Robespierre is someone to be ashamed of goes back a long way. After his death, one of his contemporaries, Jean Baptiste Dauchez, a fellow lawyer from Arras, suggested an ‘impenetrable curtain’ should be drawn over all that had passed in the local
assembly that elected Robespierre as a representative in 1789 and launched him on a career in national politics with such devastating consequences. Dauchez wanted to forget the story, wanted others not to find out. And his suggestion has been taken surprisingly seriously in Arras for over two hundred years. Entry to the Maison Robespierre is
free, yet visitors leave feeling short-changed, hardly any more informed about the young life of the local revolutionary no one is eager to discuss. Inside, in one corner, are three or four photocopied documents (including Robespierre’s birth certificate), a brief summary of his short life, and six tiny buttons with embroidered stag heads from an elegant
waistcoat he liked to wear. Nothing more.

From Robespierre’s later years in Paris, there is of course a wide range of portraits, engravings and caricatures to give us some notion of what he was like physically. There are also innumerable verbal descriptions of him in the memoirs, diaries and letters of those who knew him more
or less well. One contemporary claimed that he had the head of a cat: ‘But this face changed its character. At first it had the anxious but rather gentle look of the domestic cat; then the fierce look of the wild cat; and finally the ferocious look of the tiger cat.’ There is indeed something feline in the surviving images of his face. He had big almond-
shaped eyes, high-arching brows and a long but not peculiarly large or prominent nose that continued the line of his back-sloping forehead, already exaggerated by receding hair and a short and impeccably powdered wig. ‘He had a sinister expression of countenance, never looked you in the face, and had a continual and unpleasant winking of the eyes.’ He
needed glasses, but is only pictured wearing them in one unusually dishevelled sketch, the last done in his lifetime, on the day he fell from power. At an earlier, quieter time another artist drew him with his glasses carefully balanced halfway up his forehead, far enough below the wig to avoid powder smears, looking every bit as affected as someone in a
holiday snapshot with sunglasses on his head. Under the drawing are the words ‘green eyes, pale complexion, green striped nankeen jacket, blue waistcoat with blue stripes, white cravat striped with red’.

Many allude to Robespierre’s vanity and fastidiousness about clothes. Before the Revolution he was registered as a customer in a
clothing shop in Arras, but he was not rich, and his purchases there were few and modest. Later political power did not diminish his preoccupation with appearance. At the height of his career he wore a beautiful sky-blue coat more suited to the courts of the old kings of France than a revolutionary assembly negotiating with violent mobs in the streets.
But Robespierre would make no sartorial concessions to the times. He was particularly fond of elaborately embroidered waistcoats – an unlikely taste in a political activist who rose to power championing democracy and the rights of the poor in the face of aristocratic privilege.

‘He was five feet two or three inches tall,’ someone else remembered, not
especially small by eighteenth-century standards:

He held his body stiffly upright; and walked firmly, quickly, and rather jerkily; he often clenched his hands as though by a kind of contraction of the nerves, and the same movement could be
traced in his neck and shoulders, which he moved convulsively to right and left. His clothes were neat and fashionable, and his hair always carefully dressed. There was nothing remarkable about his face, which wore a rather discontented expression; his
complexion was livid and bilious, his eyes dull and melancholy; whilst a frequent flickering of his eyelids was perhaps a result of the convulsive movements that I have already mentioned. He always wore green-tinted glasses. He had learnt how to give
artificial softness to a voice that was naturally sharp and harsh, and to make his Artois accent sound attractive; but he never looked an honest man in the face.\textsuperscript{10}

He looked at his audience though. He carried a second pair of large rimmed
eyeglasses to fit on top of the green-tinted ones when he wanted to fix his listeners better with his feeble green eyes. He was both short- and long-sighted, so everything he saw was slightly blurred. His glasses helped him focus, they filtered the harsh sunlight, and they were also props used to dramatic effect as he spoke at the tribune. ‘His delivery was slow, and
his phrases so long that every time he paused and pushed his glasses up onto his forehead one might have thought that he had no more to say; but, after looking all around the Hall, he would lower his spectacles again, and add a phrase or two to sentences which were already long enough when he broke them off.'

For the last years of his
life Robespierre lived in a house in the rue Saint-Honoré with a Parisian furniture-maker and his family, the Duplays. They adored him. Here he was surrounded by representations of himself: a little god in a domestic setting. There were many mirrors, his full-length portrait, his bust in metal or terracotta, and – rumour has it – print after print of him all
over the walls.\textsuperscript{12} It was the kind of shrine that Robespierre’s remaining friends would still like to have. I hope one day we get it. It would be very interesting to see what it feels like to be in a room dominated by him; to look again at all those images of him; to stand by the window and wonder what it was he saw, gazing at obsessively
repeated representations of himself as the French Revolution unfurled outside the door. It is the pictures in Robespierre’s mind that are the key to his story. Two of them are more vivid than any of the others: his picture of an ideal society and his picture of himself. The Revolution superimposed these two pictures and he believed, to the point of insanity, that he
was the instrument of Providence, delivering France to her exalted future. If the French were not yet worthy of such a future, it was clear to him that they must be regenerated – through virtue or terror – until they became what destiny demanded of them. And yet he hesitated, holding something back, even in this extreme and fanatical state of mind. He knew that
his ideal society was ultimately greater than himself. If his life had coincided with its birth, if he had played his part in realising it in history, he could go tranquilly to his death, as he did, many times, in his imagination, before his body went under the guillotine.
Part I

Before the Revolution

(1758–1788)
ROBESPIERRE’S STORY BEGINS in the small city of Arras, in the province of Artois, in
northern France. For centuries Arras was on the border between France and the Netherlands, changing hands many times before it was firmly annexed by the French monarchy in 1659. Then the city walls were fortified and Arras settled down to a more peaceful existence as the province’s ecclesiastical and judicial centre. It was known as ‘the
city of a hundred steeples’ because visitors approaching across the surrounding fields, or on the fine gravel road from the nearby town of Béthune, saw from afar the tall spires of Arras’s gothic bell tower, the cathedral, the abbey, eleven parish churches, over twenty monasteries and convents, numerous hospices, chapels and charitable institutions.
Conservative piety pervaded the narrow cobbled streets like the smell of incense, as some twenty thousand men, women and children went about their daily devotional duties.

Robespierre’s birth in 1758 coincided with the beginning of an economic boom in Arras: work had begun to connect the eastern and western sides of the city,
which were separated by a branch of the river Crinchnon. There were ambitious schemes to clean the river, a seething channel of infection, and to dam or bridge the many places where it seeped insistently into the streets. There were elaborate plans to reconstruct the cathedral, which dated back to AD 687, and to renovate the Abbey of Saint-Vaast, which, along
with a lavish income and considerable personal power, made the bishopric of Arras an attractive post for the younger sons of France’s nobles. Alongside the new public buildings, wealthy investors commissioned townhouses several storeys high, to meet growing demands for accommodation. The price of land was rising. Every Wednesday and
Saturday even more people crowded inside the city walls to attend the twice-weekly markets trading in regional produce: hemp, flax, wool, soap, lace, porcelain – and especially grain.

The grain trade was the main cause of this economic vibrancy. In the distant past Arras’s wealth had come from the beautiful tapestries that adorned Europe’s
medieval castles. But while Shakespeare’s Hamlet may have immortalised these tapestries by lunging at a rat behind the arras, they were not the source of the city’s eighteenth-century wealth. Rather, local landowners, most of them nobles, had grown extremely rich from the rents on their arable land. The façades of their fine new buildings were decorated with
stylised sheaves of corn signalling the source of the money that financed them. These well-to-do landowners were responsible too for Arras’s atmosphere of optimism and urban refinement. Paris was less than twenty-four hours away by courier.

Behind all this prosperity there lay an onerous system of privilege by which the
upper classes lived at the expense of the community; a system of taxation that placed the heaviest burden on those least capable of bearing it; outdated restrictions on manufacture and commerce; and the vestiges of feudalism that weighed heavily on the peasants in the countryside. Along with the economy, crime thrived in Arras. The city’s three prisons were
crammed full, and processions of beggars, criminals and prostitutes were often seen leaving the city under armed guard, heading north for the house of correction in Lille.

The de Robespierre family, established in the province for three centuries at least, was respectable, but not noble.² It did not own arable land, so did not benefit
directly from Arras’s economic boom. The family had a coat of arms (which appears on a document of 1462), but the particule ‘de’ included in its name indicated only that they were not manual labourers. One early record mentions Robert de Robespierre, living near Béthune in the mid-fifteenth century and working as un homme de justice. In the
sixteenth century there was another Robert de Robespierre at Béthune, a clerk and a grocer. His great-grandson was a notary, attorney and clerk in Carvins, where the main branch of the family lived until the first Maximilien de Robespierre (grandfather of the revolutionary) moved to Arras as a barrister. Canny at self-advancement, he married
an innkeeper’s daughter and through her acquired some property in the city. It happened that in 1745, Charles Edward Stuart, the Young Pretender in exile, came to Arras and stayed six months. When he was leaving he bequeathed the city a masonic lodge, in gratitude for the hospitality he had received. He appointed Robespierre’s grandfather as
an official of the lodge – of all the people in Arras, the first Maximilien had been particularly ingratiating. Everything went well enough, though there were eight children to feed and clothe and never quite enough money for comfort. But gradually it became clear that the eldest son, the second Maximilien (father of the revolutionary), was a bit
dissolute and unstable.

At the age of seventeen, Robespierre’s father was encouraged by his family to begin a novitiate with the Premonstratensians of Dommartin (a religious order originally founded in northern France by St Norbert in the twelfth century). He gave up when he realised he had no vocation. After reading law at Douai he came home again to
Arras to work as a barrister, but almost immediately got Jacqueline Marguerite Carraut, the daughter of a local brewer in the rue Ronville, pregnant out of wedlock. The shame and scandal associated with illegitimacy in a small conservative city like Arras were considerable. Traditionally it was common for families to ostracise their
wayward children, or even request their imprisonment. The Church was ubiquitous. Public and private libraries were full of religious texts outlining appropriate codes of spiritual and moral conduct, while the homes of nobles, bourgeois lawyers and artisans were crammed with material objects evoking them: crucifixes, missals, and images of the life of Christ.
and the saints, before which a pious wife might kneel on an ornate prie-dieu.

Robespierre was rescued just in time from the serious penalties of illegitimacy (which he would later help to dismantle in the course of the Revolution) by his parents’ hasty marriage on 2 January 1758, when his mother was already five months pregnant. His paternal grandparents
refused to attend the wedding. Four months later, they relented and agreed to act as witnesses at the baptism of their grandson: Maximilien Marie Isidore de Robespierre, born in Arras on 6 May 1758, to a family whose wealth and status were declining steadily at a time when the city, in general, was flourishing. After her first son, Robespierre’s mother gave
birth to a baby almost every year – two daughters, Charlotte then Henriette, another son, Augustin, and a fifth child that did not survive. She died on 14 July 1764 at the age of twenty-nine – an ordinary eighteenth-century woman defeated by pregnancy and childbirth. Robespierre was six at the time.

In the sentimental
memoirs of his sister Charlotte, the death of their mother was the pivotal emotional crisis in her elder brother’s life. She remembered that their younger brother, Augustin, was under two, and still away from home with a wet-nurse. So as the older siblings watched the funeral preparations they were at least spared the screams of a
hungry infant denied its mother’s breast. Robespierre was inconsolable in a more complex and lasting way: he treasured the memory of a gentle woman lost to her young children at the time they most needed her. Before she died she found time to teach him to make lace skilfully, but precious little else. Whenever he spoke of her to Charlotte later in life,
his eyes always filled with tears.

Soon after their mother’s death their father began abandoning his young and grieving family for long periods of time, sometimes reappearing briefly in Arras to borrow money, and on one occasion even renouncing his own and his children’s claims on the de Robespierre estate in order to raise some ready
cash. Charlotte excuses this behaviour by claiming that her father was demented with grief, but it is equally likely that he was still the profligate and unstable character who had caused his own parents so much concern. Deprived of their mother and without any independent means of support, the four siblings whom grief had drawn so close together were soon to
be physically separated. The two boys went to live with their maternal grandparents in the brewery; and aunts on their father’s side of the family took in Charlotte and Henriette, who went on Sunday visits to their brothers a few streets away across the smaller of Arras’s two market squares. The fact that these children were shared out between their relatives like an
unwelcome burden did not escape Robespierre. According to Charlotte, his character underwent a complete transformation: where previously he had been boisterous, careless, light-hearted just like other children, he became serious, poised, responsible and diligent. From this point on he joined in his siblings’ childish games only to
explain or enforce the rules. He preferred solitary pursuits, like building model chapels and reading. He had a small collection of pictures and engravings that he liked to arrange in exhibitions for his sisters, delighting in their admiration. He was also given some sparrows and pigeons that he raised and cherished as pets. He would place them very gently one
after the other into his sisters’ cupped hands during their visits.

Charlotte and Henriette once asked to borrow one of these birds, care for it in their aunts’ house and return it safely the following week. Robespierre was hesitant, but they were persistent, begging, promising to look after it, so he agreed. Inevitably, the bird was left in the garden, a storm
blew up and it died. Robespierre was furious. ‘At the news of this death, the tears of Maximilien flowed,’ Charlotte reported. ‘He showered us with reproaches which we more than deserved, and vowed never again to entrust us with one of his precious pigeons.’ Sixty years later, Charlotte recalled this timeless childhood drama, ‘the tragic
end of the poor pigeon’, tearfully. How could her brother’s detractors imagine that his early years in Arras were spent cutting off the heads of small birds with a toy guillotine? How could they so besmirch the kind and sensitive soul, the character full of le bon naturel she had loved all her life?

Besides his bereavement, depression and heightened
sense of responsibility, it is reasonable to assume that Robespierre grew up with a vague but persistent sense of familial shame. His father came from a long line of provincial lawyers, but he had wasted his promising start in life, failed to build on the achievements of his own father and had left his sons to build their lives with appreciably fewer advantages.
than those he had himself enjoyed. In 1772 he disappeared for good and his children never knew where or when exactly he died. On top of the practical difficulties Robespierre faced as an orphan – the uncomfortable dependency and penury – he had three siblings to care for, and his father’s reputation for irresponsibility to live down. He grew up among relatives
who could scarcely utter his father’s name without regret and disappointment. Gazing out of the window of his grandparents’ house in the rue Ronville, down the busy street to the Church of Jean-Baptiste, there must have been times when he wished it was his mother’s more modest name, Carraut, that he was carrying forwards into the unknown future, not that
of his disgraced father and disappointed grandfather, Maximilien de Robespierre.

Robespierre’s first school was the local Collège d’Arras, where he went at the age of eight having already learnt to read and write. The Collège d’Arras was founded in the sixteenth century and richly endowed. It had over four
hundred pupils, all boys. A small number boarded at the school, but most, like Robespierre, were day pupils, the sons of the province’s professional families. One old school fellow later remembered Robespierre as ‘a conventional good boy’, another claimed he had a detestable character and inordinate love of domination, but these are the
trite kinds of characterisation anyone might make about a distantly remembered acquaintance from school. The Collège d’Arras was governed by a committee that included the Bishop of Arras, the teachers were priests, and the pedagogical emphasis was on learning the rudiments of Latin. Robespierre worked hard for three years, then distinguished himself by
winning a scholarship to the elite Collège Louis-le-Grand in Paris, whose illustrious alumni included the playwright Molière, the philosophe Voltaire and the Marquis de Sade. Here he would receive the rest of his schooling, and vocational training in law, between the ages of eleven and twenty-three.

The scholarship was one
of four given by Arras’s Abbot of Saint-Vaast, who was personally known to Robespierre’s pious aunts. Those who doubt his natural talents and intellect suspect that it was really these family connections – not merit or achievement – that secured Robespierre this first important break from a constrained provincial childhood. Even his sister
Charlotte, whose memoirs are usually so biased in his favour, comments that of her two brothers the elder was the less academically gifted. He was, however, far more diligent and determined to succeed than the younger Augustin. His siblings saw Robespierre off on the public coach to Paris in October 1769, deeply distraught at the parting. Robespierre cried a
great deal too, but there was already something firm and resolute in his character that helped him focus on the long road stretching out before him. In the emotional last days before he left Arras, he gave his sisters all his toys – the model chapels he had constructed, the pictures and engravings he had collected, everything with which he had amused himself as a child –
except his birds, for which he found a more trustworthy home. He loved his sisters, would miss them dearly, but they had already killed one of his pigeons, and there were to be no second chances. He was not the kind of person to forget being let down by anyone.

At the time of Robespierre’s schooling, education in France was in an
unusually chaotic state. Only seven years before Robespierre left Arras, the controversial Jesuit order had been expelled from its hundreds of educational establishments. Political and theological opponents of the order – the more puritan and morally severe Jansenists, and other detractors who denounced the Jesuits’ loyalty to Rome as anti-French – had
finally prevailed on a reluctant Louis XV to act against them. Throughout the country Jesuit school buildings, property and facilities were suddenly deserted when their order was officially suppressed, accused of teaching dangerous theology, promoting sin, amassing material wealth and perverting young boys. The Jesuits had only a single
college in Paris, but it was an important one: the large and prestigious Louis-le-Grand, founded in the mid-sixteenth century in the heart of the Latin Quarter, just across the street from the much older Sorbonne. In the administrative confusion that followed the Jesuits’ expulsion, Louis-le-Grand came under the direction of the University of Paris and
was reinvented as a college particularly dedicated to the encouragement of scholarship students ‘whose means do not allow them to enjoy the same advantages as others’.\(^4\)

Here, at least, among a throng of other scholarship students from backgrounds as modest as his own, the proud and serious young Robespierre, with his paltry wardrobe and conspicuous
lack of familial wealth, would feel not wholly out of place. Twice during his time at Louis-le-Grand he had to apply to his préfet d’études, or director of studies, for money to buy decent clothes. Perhaps this meant he was significantly poorer than lots of the other boys, or perhaps he preferred to spend his money on books. As he tried to settle into the new school,
with its austere entrance gateway, eight quadrangles, private chapel and lecture rooms, it might have helped that in 1763 the Collège d’Arras was one of a number of provincial schools affiliated with Louis-le-Grand, making the move to Paris a natural next step for a promising pupil from the town. From Robespierre’s point of view, the expulsion
of the Jesuits was a piece of good luck – a benign historical contingency that helped him break free from the restrictive circumstances into which he had been born.  

The year of the Jesuits’ expulsion from their schools, 1762, saw another upheaval in educational thinking with the publication of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s sensational novel *Émile*. Part
fiction, part treatise on education, the book was almost immediately condemned by the Archbishop of Paris and publicly burnt. Despite this, and perhaps in part because of it, Émile became a bestseller, plunging the country further into debate about the schooling of its young and all that was morally, spiritually and
politically at stake. Rousseau escaped arrest and imprisonment only by fleeing France in the middle of the night. It was the ‘heretical’ discussion of religion in Émile that caused so much trouble. The Archbishop especially objected to Rousseau’s insistence that mankind is naturally good but corrupted by society.

Rousseau was of a
particularly sensitive and emotional temperament. He, like Robespierre, lost his mother prematurely, from complications following childbirth, and spent his early childhood reading her collection of sentimental novels, before moving on to philosophy at which, unexpectedly, he proved to be a genius. In his own words Émile was ‘merely a treatise
on the original goodness of man, intended to show how vice and error, alien to his constitution, are introduced into it from outside and imperceptibly distort it’. His aim was to set out the kind of education that might preserve and protect the natural goodness of man from the corrupting influences of society. It was not a practical programme of reform, but a
bold and subversive study of the influences that shape a child that remains topical to this day. ‘We know nothing of childhood,’ Rousseau insisted. He thought childhood was completely misunderstood because people were always ‘looking for the man in the child, not thinking of what he is before he becomes a man’. Émile was a radical departure from
existing approaches to education, and arguably the most important treatise on the subject since Plato’s *Republic*.

Rousseau opens the novel with a controversial argument for maternal breast-feeding. Even comparatively impoverished urban women like Robespierre’s mother dispatched their babies to wet-nurses, usually in the
countryside. Rousseau thought this ill-advised and unnatural:

These gentle mothers, having got rid of their babies, devote themselves gaily to the pleasures of the town. Do they know how their children are being treated in the villages? If the nurse
is at all busy, the child is hung up on a nail like a bundle of clothes and is left crucified while the nurse goes leisurely about her business. Children have been found in this position purple in the face …

Any mother would feel panic and guilt reading this.
Rousseau wanted to shake a society that seemed to him complacent in its corrupt practices, so Émile was full of clever, carefully aimed provocation. ‘I hate books’ is an odd statement to find in a treatise on education. And some of Rousseau’s advice is so far-fetched it is ridiculous: ‘The only habit the child should be allowed to contract is that of having no habits.’
Yet at the centre of this important book is the revolutionary idea that mankind is not the being blighted by original sin that lies at the core of Christianity. Although the Jesuits certainly had a positive view of human nature, none of them went as far as Rousseau in his defence of the idea of natural, healthy, unsullied mankind: ‘Let us
lay it down as an incontrovertible rule that the first impulses of nature are always right; there is no original sin in the human heart, the how and why of the entrance of every vice can be traced.’

We do not know when Robespierre first read Rousseau, but very probably it was during his time at Louis-le-Grand. What is
indisputable though is that when he did, he took him into his mind as a companion for life. In the Mémoires authentiques de Maximilien Robespierre, a forgery from 1830, there is an account of the young Maximilien’s pilgrimage to see the aged, isolated, persecuted author in the final years of his extremely strange life. While the source is discredited,
almost no one who writes about Robespierre can simply ignore it: the apocryphal meeting with his lifelong hero, who died in 1778, is too alluring to pass over.

I saw you during your last days, and the memory remains a source of joy and pride. I contemplated your august features,
and saw on them the marks of the dark disappointments to which you were condemned by the injustice of mankind. Thus I understood all the pains of a noble life dedicated to the cult of truth. They did not scare me. Awareness of having wanted the good for
others is the virtuous man’s reward; next comes the recognition of those who surround his memory with the honours that his contemporaries denied him. Like you I want to purchase such goods at the price of an arduous life – even at the price of a premature death. ⁹
The meeting might have taken place in the woods near the Parisian suburb Ermenonville, where Rousseau went to live and think about his final book, *Les rêveries du promeneur solitaire* (Reveries of the Solitary Walker). Or indoors in an attic in the rue Plâtrière: the author bedridden, the frail student breathless from climbing the stairs,
overwhelmed with emotion when he reached the top. Both scenes are fanciful, but the spell Rousseau cast over Robespierre is not. It can be traced in’ many different ways throughout his life. In the end its political consequences were devastating, but it began as a personal sentiment, nothing more or less than a temperamental affinity.
Rousseau had a profound love of individual liberty and a fear of coercion so intense that he was almost allergic to power. Robespierre identified with the victims of injustice – those misunderstood, isolated, denied or despised by their peers. What the two men shared was compassion for the vulnerable and a fierce censoriousness toward those less principled in their
attitudes to power than they were confident of being themselves.

The regime at Louis-le-Grand gave equal attention to the moral characters of the school’s charges and their academic attainment. Both objectives were pursued through a rigid daily timetable with strong
emphasis on devotional duties. During his schooldays, Robespierre rose from his dormitory bed, freezing cold in winter, at 5.30 a.m., attended prayers at 6 a.m., scripture study at 6.15 a.m. and Mass at 10.30 a.m. After a long day of lessons there were more prayers and devotional readings at 8.45 p.m., after which the boys undressed for bed while
listening to a reading from the life of the saint whose feast occurred the following day. They were expected to go to confession once a month, and the college brought in clergy from outside who were not members of staff for this purpose, hoping perhaps to bolster the boys’ trust in the confidential nature of the sacrament. How did Robespierre respond to these
devout routines? Some of his enemies have imagined him waging a silent bitter protest: standing with the Book of Hours in his hands, the pages resolutely unturned, refusing to pray or sing, shunning the confessional and Holy Communion. But if his own testimony can be believed, he was a more passive and conventional schoolboy. He later rated himself ‘a pretty
poor Catholic ever since my time at College’, which suggests that, whether by force or inclination, he must still have been a practising Catholic at school.

The pupils were effectively cloistered inside the walls of Louis-le-Grand, and their contact with the exciting city of Paris outside the main gate on the rue Saint-Jacques was severely
limited. Earlier in the century, Rousseau had described Paris as a city of ‘small, dirty and stinking streets, ugly black houses, an air of filth, poverty, beggars, carters, seamstresses, women hawking tisanes and old hats’. But with a population of around 600,000, Paris was the largest city in Europe after London, and it is hard to believe that the students at
Louis-le-Grand felt as negatively about it as Rousseau did. The boys went on outings only infrequently and always under the strict supervision of chaperons. Aside from external clergymen to hear confession, the only regular visitors to the school were tailors, shoemakers, launderers and hairdressers. Some of these could be persuaded to
smuggle proscribed books, like Rousseau’s Émile, into the college, concealed inside washing baskets or under piles of repaired clothes. And for this reason, pupils were expressly forbidden to commission errands of any kind without official permission. Despite these strictures, soon after he arrived in Paris Robespierre managed somehow to
develop a close friendship with a canon of Notre-Dame, M. Delaroche. He was a distant relative, and Robespierre’s aunts encouraged Maximilien to get in touch in hope of finding a sympathetic confidant in the big city. According to Charlotte, their relationship got off to an excellent start, with Robespierre finding a mentor in the older man and
M. Delaroche discerning rare qualities in the young boy. Within two years, however, the canon was dead, and Robespierre had lost yet another adult protector. Once again he consoled himself with the solitary pursuit of reading.

The college library, where he spent so many hours, was beautiful. Light streamed in through its twenty-five large
windows and fell across the desks and open books. Looking up from his page, a dreamy or distracted schoolboy might grow fond of the paintings that adorned the library walls. Robespierre already loved paintings, but these were far more intriguing than any he could have owned, or perhaps even seen, in Arras. Also in the library stood two pairs of
globes, made by the Italian cartographer Coronelli for Louis XIV in the seventeenth century: reminders of the immensity of the world beyond the college walls. When he wasn’t dreaming, Robespierre could choose from an impressive range of approved books. The Jesuits had begun the collection of over 35,000 volumes. When they were expelled from the
college most of their books were repurchased for the library. All of them were confiscated during the Revolution when Louis-le-Grand was renamed Equality College, but the revolutionary librarian in charge of the operation was moved to acknowledge that they were ‘… an assortment of the best works in all fields. It is evident that the library was
brought together by men of learning.’ The books were later returned to the University of Paris where they have remained ever since. The report on the confiscation also lists two old microscopes, good-quality lenses, a strong magnet, a glass case for natural history specimens and some animal horns and claws. But in Robespierre’s day the
curriculum still centred, as it had done for decades, on the classic literatures of Greece and Rome. These were the subjects that really interested him, not the newer, tentatively introduced opportunities to study experimental science.

The most detailed account of Robespierre’s school days can be found in an embittered early biography that still turns
up in Arras from time to time. It drew on the memories of the abbé Proyart, who taught at Louis-le-Grand during Robespierre’s time there, and was first published in 1795 by Le Blond de Neuvéglise, then amended and reissued in Arras in 1850 by the abbé Proyart’s nephew. According to this source, Robespierre was the kind of boy with whom parents preferred their
sons not to associate. He was seething with envy and a subversive egoism that constantly put him at odds with the school rules. When he troubled himself to conform, it was only because his excessive pride made him dread humiliating reprimands. He viewed his school as a prison, its pupils as captives and the teachers (priests or lay clergy) as despotic
oppressors of liberty. But he was far from audacious in the face of this oppression. One day, for example, a prefect, Yves-Marie Audrein, came upon Robespierre reading a forbidden book in an unfrequented corner of the school – Émile, perhaps, or another of Rousseau’s works illicitly smuggled in. The frightened boy threw himself at the prefect’s feet, begging
not to be exposed. Since the prefect was himself interested in new and progressive ideas, he took mercy on the young boy.

If this incident, or something even remotely similar, actually occurred, abject panic would almost certainly have been a histrionic response. The proscription of books at Louis-le-Grand was taken
seriously and covered by the institutional statutes drawn up after the Jesuits were expelled. Article 10 under Title 5 stipulates: ‘Each assistant master will often examine the books that his pupils are reading; he will take away those that are dangerous to morals or religion, and not allow even those that are simply useless or might engender a taste for
frivolity. He will prevent his pupils from lending books to each other without his consent.’ There were many such statutes, excessively detailed, covering everything from religious exercises to personal hygiene and behaviour on school outings, where pupils were to ‘walk neither too fast nor too slowly, nor raise their voices, nor offer provocation to
anyone’. But those who found themselves in contravention of the statutes (and there must have been many) were unlikely to receive corporal punishment as severe as that dealt out in some other Parisian colleges. Article 5 under Title 1 directs that masters ‘will use no severity until they have exhausted all other means of making an impression on an honest and
sensitive mind’.

The statutes were normative, not descriptive, and Robespierre’s school doubtless had its fair share of sadistic masters ready to vent their frustrations on vulnerable children. But at least some of the teachers were open to progressive thinking and keen to encourage it in their pupils. Before the Revolution, the
abbé Proyart wrote in defence of this aspect of Louis-le-Grand and the nine other colleges that had come under the direction of the University of Paris: ‘I have looked everywhere for the Émile of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and I find him nowhere but in his book. But the Émiles formed by the University of Paris I can find at the head of church and state; I can show them to
you, standing out from the crowd, in every walk and condition of society.’

Serenely unaware of the Revolution to come, Proyart even praised the sense of equality that prevailed at Louis-le-Grand, fondly terming it a ‘little republic’. No wonder he became so bitter. Looking back in 1800, Proyart insisted that Louis XVI had been effectively
dethroned before even becoming king, by a godless and subversive generation nurtured in the Parisian colleges. Imagining himself back in 1762, he wrote a retrospective diatribe against the expulsion of the Jesuits in which the revolutionary careers of Robespierre, the prefect Audrein who supposedly surprised him with the forbidden book and
turned a blind eye, and other famous ex-pupils are presented in apocalyptic terms.

Remember that it is the educational establishment called Louis-le-Grand, from which you are today expelling the Jesuits, that will send forth twenty-five years
from now, furies armed with torches to burn their country, firebrands who will sound the tocsin against kings and their ministers. The same establishment will send forth an apostate priest, whose sacrilegious hand will violate the secret portfolio of his king,
to draw from it charges justifying regicide and forge capital crimes: his name will be Audrein. And it is from this establishment that there will come, in human form, a more atrocious being than any known to the barbarism of antiquity, who, after
having, more than anyone else, determined the murder of his king, will himself rule over you and yours by daggers and assassinations, and will drink the blood of a million men ... his execrable name will be Robespierre.¹³
In 1793, as the Revolution slid into the Terror and the republican constitution of France was suspended, Robespierre looked back on his schooling. He claimed that the colleges directed by the University of Paris had been ‘nurseries of republicanism, which formed the mind of the Nation and made it worthy of liberty’. This was overstating the case,
as he of all people must have been aware: on the brink of Terror the mind of France was incoherent with factional strife, far from ready for the particular brand of liberty that Robespierre espoused. But his friend and fellow pupil, Camille Desmoulins, said similar things about their shared experience at Louis-le-Grand, citing masters who taught them to hate their own
government and love republican liberty: ‘We were brought up in the schools of Rome and Athens, and in the pride of the Republic, only to live in the abjection of the monarchy … It was foolish to imagine … that we could admire the past without condemning the present.’

One master in particular may have played such a part — the abbé Hérivaux,
nicknamed the Roman, whose subject was rhetoric. Well respected and holding a responsible position at the college, Hérivaux apparently saw no glaring incompatibility between his ardent admiration for the heroes of Ancient Rome and the confident teaching or practice of Catholicism. Robespierre spent two years in his class, possibly because
his performance in the first year was mediocre, and he longed to assuage his injured pride and redeem his reputation. With characteristic determination and application, he did manage to win a prize in the second year. But in the meantime his amour-propre had been further inflamed by Hérivaux’s repeated and only partly playful assertions that
there was something distinctively Roman in Robespierre's character and countenance. Robespierre was clearly flattered by Hérivaux, glad of the attention from an approving teacher, and perhaps further reinforced in his fondness for classical literature.

One day in 1775, Louis-le-Grand all but exploded with excitement: Louis XVI
had decided to pay a state visit to the school on the way back from his coronation at Reims. The news spread like wildfire through the corridors, classrooms and dormitories – everyone talked of it. Louis XVI was just four years older than Robespierre, twenty-one at the time of his accession. He set out with youthful optimism to win acclaim and affection from
his subjects. As he put it, ‘I wish to be loved.’ France, unfortunately, was not in a particularly loving condition. Public spending was spiralling out of control. Attempts to reform and liberalise the grain trade during the first year of Louis XVI’s reign led to panic buying, rioting, a dramatic rise in the price of bread, and unrest that ended with a spate
of public executions. In the circumstances, the new king had been advised to scale down and modernise the traditional coronation ceremony that was planned for June 1775 – perhaps even move it to Paris, where it might raise more revenue from public participation.

There were limits, however, to Louis XVI’s willingness to please public
opinion, and the coronation was duly enacted in full accordance with ancient custom in the cathedral at Reims, where French kings had been anointed and crowned for a thousand years. He had, in fact, already ruled for ten months by the time of his coronation, and many of his subjects were by now seriously querulous. The ceremony was supposed to
disguise such rifts in a show of unity and religious respect for the absolute monarch of France, God’s representative on earth, in whom sovereign power resided. Instead, it inadvertently highlighted the deepest source of the nation’s discontent. French society was divided into three orders: the Clergy, the Nobility and the Third Estate (or Commons). Everyone who
was not a member of either the Clergy or the Nobility was a member of the Third Estate, which included professional families like Robespierre’s, artisans, manual labourers and peasants. There were approximately 130,000 members of the Clergy, 110,000 members of the Nobility, and 24,750,000 members of the Third Estate.
The Clergy owned about a fifth of the nation’s land but paid no taxes, the Nobility owned another fifth but paid no taxes, and the Third Estate shared the rest of the land between them and carried the entire tax burden. This unjust arrangement was deeply resented – it meant privileges for the minority and poverty for the majority of French people. At the king’s
coronation the Third Estate was further insulted by being barred entry to the cathedral. Afterwards Louis XVI was not even presented to them in his full regalia for fear they might get ideas above their station. Among the disappointed crowd outside the cathedral was the young Georges Jacques Danton from Arcis-sur-Aube, playing truant from his school in
Troyes. He had walked all the way to the cathedral on foot, hoping to see for himself ‘how they made a king’. But rather than greet the crowd, the new king chose to participate in a series of smaller, more controlled encounters with his public. He laid a commemorative stone at the University of Reims before leaving the city, and he stopped on his way
back to Versailles at Louis-le-Grand.

Out of five hundred pupils in the school, Robespierre was chosen to deliver a ceremonial speech of welcome to Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette. He was the master of rhetoric’s favourite prize-winning student, so hardly a contentious or unlikely choice. But the abbé Proyart read more into it,
suspecting that in choosing Robespierre for such a prominent encounter with the new king, Hérivaux (the Roman) hoped to inspire the heart and soul of a future assassin like Brutus or conspirator like Catiline. On the day of the visit, Robespierre, much rehearsed and very nervous, knelt outside Louis-le-Grand, at the head of the assembled body
of the University of Paris, which was also kneeling and waiting for the royal party to arrive. It was June, but it was raining. For this or other reasons, the royal couple remained inside their coach, acknowledged the speech of welcome with polite smiles, and promptly drove on towards the Church of Sainte-Geneviève. Robespierre, along with everyone else, had
probably been waiting in the street for many hours. The new or borrowed clothes he was wearing would have been soaked through. It is plausible he felt a sense of anticlimax mingled with relief that his speech was over, or perhaps a twinge of disappointment that the king had not spoken directly to him. But there is no reason to suppose, as his hostile biographers have, that
Robespierre was already someone of such spectacular egocentricity as to feel personally insulted by what occurred that day in the rue Saint-Jacques.

While he was away at school, Robespierre’s younger sister Henriette died. In her memoirs, Charlotte remarks that their childhood was awash with tears, almost every year marred by the
death of someone close and dear: ‘This fatal destiny influenced Maximilien’s character more than one would think: it left him sad and melancholy.’ He threw himself into his work, redoubled his efforts to succeed, and, according to Charlotte, ‘always carried off first prize’, which is certainly not true. She claims that despite his sadness and his
devotion to his studies, her brother was affable and popular with both his teachers and his peers: ‘his disposition was so even and sweet that he never had a single row with his fellow pupils; he appointed himself the protector of small boys against older ones, intervening on their behalf and even fighting in their defence when his eloquence
did not prevail’. Charlotte was so biased in her brother’s favour she did not notice the contradiction here – one minute he never quarrelled, the next he was brawling to defend the vulnerable in the courtyards of Louis-le-Grand. He was, however, protective of younger boys: Camille Desmoulins, two years his junior, was one of the students who came under his
wing. This clever, attractive boy from Guise in Picardy, whose lieutenant-colonel father saved hard to buy him a superior education, became Robespierre’s closest companion. Their friendship deepened dramatically during the Revolution – until it went disastrously wrong.\textsuperscript{15}

Another schoolmate with a revolutionary future ahead of him was Louis Marie
Stanislas Fréron, whose memories of Robespierre were distinctly unfavourable:

He was the same [at college] as he was in later days – melancholy, bilious, morose and jealous of his comrades’ successes; never taking part in their games, but going for
solitary walks, striding along, in the manner of a dreamer and an invalid. There was nothing young about him. His restless face already showed the convulsive grimaces we came to know so well.

Uncommunicative, reserved, unbending,
secretive, his most marked qualities were a self-centred amour-propre, invincible stubbornness, and fundamental dishonesty. I can’t recall seeing him smile, not once. If anyone offended him he never forgot it. Vindictive and treacherous, he had
already learnt to conceal his resentment. 16

This retrospective account is hostile and sour, but it does echo many of the characteristics attributed to Robespierre by his friends and his sister. He was melancholy, serious, reserved and stubborn: a loner, a dreamer, tenacious of offence
and unwilling to participate in games. Charlotte insisted that she often saw him laugh until he cried, but the haunting judgement that ‘There was nothing young about him’ could be drawn as easily from her own account of Robespierre’s childhood as from Fréron’s. Friends and enemies see different things in a person, and when they see the same things they
interpret them differently. For Charlotte and Desmoulins there was nothing sinister in Robespierre’s secretive reserve. For the abbé Proyart and Fréron there was nothing admirable in his unbending stubbornness.

Whatever the character he exhibited at school, Robespierre’s worst enemy could not doubt his academic success. When he left Louis-
le-Grand with his law degree at the age of twenty-three, he was awarded a special prize of 600 *livres* (a value in excess of a whole year’s scholarship). The college’s administrative board gave him this prize in recognition of his outstanding abilities: twelve years of good conduct and sustained academic achievement. Even more flattering was the rare
concession allowing Robespierre to transfer his scholarship to his younger brother Augustin. The abbé Proyart, looking back after the Revolution, insists that those who gave Robespierre such honours did not really know him – had no idea how his misshapen character would one day bring France to her knees in pools of blood. Yet at the time the
board’s decision was unanimous. Everyone believed that the young lawyer going home to Arras, with enough capital to set himself up in practice and to offer his sister a home of her own at last, was a credit to the charitable institution that had formed him.
The Lawyer-Poet Back Home

ROBESPIERRE MOVED BACK to
Arras in 1781, the same year that his sister Charlotte finished her schooling at a charitable institution for impoverished girls in Tournai, the religious centre of medieval Flanders, sixty miles north-east of Arras.¹

Throughout most of their childhood the two had seen each other only in the summer holidays, but even so the bond between them was
very strong. It was strengthened further by the changes they found in Arras. Together they grieved for their sister Henriette, and missed Augustin, who had taken up his brother’s scholarship at Louis-le-Grand. They grieved too for their maternal grandparents, who had both died recently, and for the family brewery in the rue Ronville, which had
been sold. The sale of the Carraut brewery resulted in a legacy, but before it could be made available to the three surviving orphaned grandchildren – Maximilien, Charlotte and Augustin – who were greatly in need of it, their aunt and uncle on their father’s side, with whom Robespierre had been planning to live, laid claim to a share. The de Robespierres
were still trying to recover the debts accrued by the children’s father, whose irresponsibility and misfortune had left them so close to destitution.

This painful reminder of his father’s shame and his own vulnerability at a point when he was deep in grief must have stung Robespierre, for he refused to support his aunt and uncle in their claim,
and hurried to rent a house of his own in the rue du Saumon, just around the corner from the old brewery which had been his childhood home. But the rent here proved too high for a newly qualified lawyer, so a year later Robespierre and Charlotte moved into rooms opposite the Abbey of Saint-Vaast, in the home of the aunt and uncle whose tactlessness
had caused such offence. No one can tell if this was because the quarrel had healed, or if Robespierre, unable to make ends meet despite his legacy, handsome school prize and growing legal practice, moved there with resentment and humiliation in his heart. It was another five years before he settled in the rented house in the rue des Rapporteurs.
that is known today as the Maison Robespierre.

His daily routine as Charlotte remembered it was rigid and austere. Rising early, he worked at home until one of the town’s many hairdressers arrived at 8 a.m. He had bread and milk for breakfast and then worked before dressing and leaving for the courts by 10 a.m. He dined lightly in the afternoon,
watering down his wine, consuming lots of coffee (which he could not do without) and displaying a particular fondness for fruit, especially oranges. Some infer from this that he was dyspeptic or frequently constipated, but his sister, unsurprisingly, offers no comment on this. He took a walk before resuming his work and ate again late in the
evening. He often seemed absent-minded or preoccupied. Charlotte recalls his indifference to food: ‘Many times I asked him what he would like to eat at dinner, and he would reply that he had no idea.’ Not noticing a missing dish, he once served himself some soup straight on to the tablecloth. He was uninterested in games as he
had been in childhood, and often sat in the corner during the after-supper cards or conversation – thinking, planning or perhaps just dreaming. It has become commonplace to claim that without the Revolution Robespierre would have continued on this sensible path, living out his natural life as an increasingly respected provincial lawyer.
Eventually he might have developed a stomach ulcer, bowel cancer, a respiratory illness spread via the river Crinchon, or some other contagious disease. After a couple of ineffective trips to local doctors and pharmacists (one of them still, in the mid-eighteenth century, stocked ‘common dragon blood’, oil of scorpion, toad powder and human brains), he would have
disappeared into obscurity for ever after receiving the Last Rites of the Catholic Church.² But the rigidity of Robespierre’s daily routine, far from restricting his prospects, left him free to take advantage of any opportunity for self-betterment or advancement that came his way, and whatever else changed he stuck to it.
During Robespierre’s short life he lived in only two places, Arras and Paris. He was briefly in Versailles at the start of the Revolution, but otherwise there were remarkably few changes of scenery. This partially explains the high-spirited excitement with which he described a short trip to visit friends or relatives at Carvins in a letter of June 1783: ‘We
started at five in the morning. Our car quitted the gates of the city at precisely the same moment as the chariot of the sun sprang from the bosom of the ocean. It was adorned with a cloth of brilliant white, one portion of which floated, on the breath of the zephyrs.'

The letter continues in hyperbolic mode. Robespierre leans out to raise his hat and bestow a gracious smile on
some watchmen who have been on duty all night or else are still half asleep on the early shift. They respond with surly indifference. He remarks, ‘I have always had an infinite self-love; that mark of contempt cut me to the quick; and for the rest of the day my temper was unbearable.’ He can, it seems, laugh at himself.

At Sens, while his
travelling companions have paused for breakfast, he avoids visiting the tourist sites, and climbs a hill to survey the plains over which the Prince of Condé, still in his early twenties, led France to victory against the Spaniards in 1643. Then he rouses a porter with keys to the Hôtel de Ville. Of all the things to see in Sens – the famous cathedral where St
Thomas à Becket spent time in exile, the Palais Synodal with its rose windows and battlements – the Hôtel de Ville was a curious choice. The building, Robespierre notes, is neither remarkable nor grand, but he was fascinated to see where the great T—— (he does not give the name), who combined the roles of judge and medical doctor, administered justice
and afterwards prescribed medical treatment for the criminals: ‘I rush into the hall. Seized with a holy awe, I fall on my knees in this august temple and kiss with transport the seat that was formerly pressed by the rump of the great T——. It was thus that Alexander knelt at the tomb of Achilles, and that Caesar paid his homage to the monument that contained the
ashes of the conqueror of Asia!’ It is unclear exactly who ‘the great T——’ was, but the reason Robespierre was so impressed by him is explicit in the letter: ‘this great man enjoyed, by virtue of his double office, the most extensive power that a man ever exercised over his compatriots’. Achilles, Alexander, Caesar were conquering heroes of a kind,
but the kind of power Robespierre admired was more sophisticated and philanthropic. He was excited by the idea of intervening in the lives of criminals and sick people – making a difference for the better.

Arriving at last at Carvins, Robespierre is immensely flattered by the interest and enthusiasm with which his party is greeted:
'How pleasant it is to travel! I said to myself. It is a great truth that one is never a prophet in one’s own land. At the gates of your own town you are despised; six leagues beyond it you are a personage worthy of public curiosity!' 5 Robespierre is certainly sending himself up, but at the same time his florid rhetoric is an evident source of self-regarding delight. The letter
also captures his readiness to suspect others of disrespecting him. The surly watchmen are a minor example, and even Robespierre could see the joke. Yet the theme of misunderstood, unrecognised or slighted greatness haunts his early writings just as it recurs over and over again in later speeches, pamphlets and letters. As he says in one of
his poems:

The just man’s torment, at his final hour,

The only pang he feels – and I shall feel –

Is the dark breath of calumny and blame

Breathed by a grimmer ghost than death himself:

The hate of those for whom he gives his life.
Law was the traditional profession of the de Robespierre family and in Arras there were still contacts and patrons to help Robespierre at the beginning of his career, despite the disrepute into which his father had fallen. While at school he had written to the head of the Paris Bar for advice in his studies: ‘I want to be a lawyer. Of all the
qualities needed for distinguishing oneself in that profession, I at least possess keen ambition, and an unqualified desire for success.’⁷ According to Charlotte, though, Robespierre’s attraction to the law was motivated by more than familial tradition, pragmatism or ambition: he had a personal predilection for what he believed to be the
most sublime profession in the world, when practised impartially and humanely. She remembers him saying:

To defend the oppressed against their oppressors, to plead the cause of the weak against the strong who exploit and crush them, this is the duty of all hearts
that egoism and corruption have not made gangrenous ...

It is so sweet to devote oneself to one’s fellows that I do not know how there can be so many unfortunates still without support or defenders. In my case, my life’s task will be to help those who
suffer, and to pursue through my avenging speech those who, without regard for humanity, take pleasure in the pain of others. How happy if my feeble efforts are crowned with success, and if, at the price of my devotion and sacrifices, my memory is not
tarnished by the crimes of the oppressors I will fight!  

Even if it is true that Robespierre made such declarations in the privacy of his own home, in front of the mirror or in the hearing of his sister, her account is composed with hindsight long after the Revolution. At the
time, Robespierre’s motives for choosing the law were more likely a mixture of high-minded principle and straightforward personal ambition for ordinary things like social status, respect, income and independence. It is possible too that he wanted to prove to his de Robespierre relatives that he could be every bit as impressive as his grandfather had been, and
considerably more so than his father ever was.

The judicial system, like so much else in Old Regime France, was extremely intricate and confusing. Arras had nine separate courts and Robespierre’s work generally took him to three of them: the Conseil d’Artois (Council of Artois), the Échevinage (Magistrates’ Court) and the Salle Épiscopale (Bishop’s...
The courts met in the morning – after Mass – in expansive halls connected by dark passages and arcades: here the Counts of Flanders had resided before Artois became part of France; now the walls were hung with portraits of distinguished local nobles and public officials. Illicit lovers, duellists, beggars and criminals took refuge in the
shadows, just feet away from the rooms in which justice was done. The arcades were a particularly dangerous place to be at night and the rubbish strewn through them festered on hot summer days. Stepping over it on his way to work Robespierre, adequately patronised and intent on advancement, quickly established himself in his chosen profession. He lost
relatively few cases and his sister claims people often asked her to explain the secret of his success. He had some natural talents: he was fluent and logical, but according to Charlotte it was his choice of cases that contributed most of all to his growing reputation. ‘He only took on just cases, never unjust, and he almost always won them.’ He preferred to represent the
poor. When opposing parties approached him, he took on the poorest of them, even if this meant he might never be paid. ‘The supporter of the oppressed and the avenger of the innocent’ Charlotte called him, making a direct connection between the boy who protected the vulnerable at school and the young lawyer.⁹

One of Robespierre’s
friends in Arras was a lawyer, twenty years older, nicknamed ‘Barometer’ Buissart on account of his keen interest in experimental science. Robespierre corresponded with Antoine Buissart and his wife throughout his political career – a fact overlooked by his detractors, who insist he was incapable of lasting friendship and eager to
renounce his provincial provenance. Buissart helped to bring Robespierre his first taste of fame beyond the city walls by involving him in the legal defence of one M. de Vissery de Bois-Valé. M. de Vissery was a lawyer, painter, botanist, amateur scientist and inventor: among the many forgotten things he invented was a technique for preserving pure water for
over a year. In 1780 he designed and positioned a lightning conductor on the roof of his house at Saint-Omer. This consisted of a pointed piece of a gilded sword screwed on to a sixteen-foot iron bar, decorated with a weathercock at the join and connected to a metal pipe running the length of the neighbouring house. The neighbour complained
and a rumour spread that the conductor threatened the lives of all in its vicinity. One woman started a petition to have it removed, provoking an early example of Robespierre’s sarcasm: ‘Many refused the glory of associating themselves with this initiative,’ he commented drily. There were, in fact, only six or seven signatories. G.H. Lewes, one of
Robespierre’s English biographers, joined him in sneering at ‘these obese and stupid citizens of Arras’. It is more charitable though to assume that the ordinary provincial neighbours failed to understand the purpose of the eye-catching novelty on M. de Vissery’s roof. The fact that the decorative weathercock featured figurative bolts of lightning
cannot have reassured those of nervous dispositions. When the Magistrates’ Court decreed that the conductor must come down, M. de Vissery appealed to the higher Council of Artois, engaging Robespierre as his advocate on Buissart’s advice. Barometer Buissart himself wrote a detailed paper on the subject after seeking guidance from
experts in the field, among them the distinguished philosophe the Marquis de Condorcet, then Secretary to the Academy of Sciences in Paris; and the future revolutionary journalist Dr Jean Paul Marat, a candidate for the directorship of the new Academy of Science in Madrid, known at the time for his research on optics and electricity. Robespierre drew
heavily on Buissart’s carefully researched paper in his pleadings of 1783 – science, after all, had not been his subject at school. In court, however, he gave the performance of his early career, evoking the persecution of Galileo, Harvey and Descartes, and calling on the judges to side with the forces of progress and enlightenment.
Scathingly he belittled those who thought lightning conductors disturbed the peace and threatened public safety; appealing to national pride he insisted that such instruments were already commonplace in England, and France must not lag behind. French scientists had contributed to the discovery of electricity – M. Dalibard, for example, had proved
Benjamin Franklin’s theory that lightning and electricity are one and the same during an experiment at Marly-la-Ville in 1752. Ignorance must not deprive the nation of its right to benefit from scientific advances.

Robespierre won the case and his success was reported in the Parisian newspaper *Mercure de France*. M. de Vissery was pleased, despite
facing renewed threats of prosecution or vandalism from his still disquieted neighbours, and he offered to finance the publication of the pleadings to make them available for wider circulation. Robespierre gratefully accepted the offer and sent a personal copy to Franklin, who was in Paris at the time, addressing him as ‘one whose least merit is to
be the most distinguished scientist in the world’. Franklin’s reply, if there was one, is lost.

If the lightning conductor case shows Robespierre as an ambitious lawyer, his defence of Marie Sommerville in 1786 shows him championing the poor and oppressed. Marie Sommerville was an Englishwoman, the young widow of Colonel George
Mercer, Lieutenant-Governor of South Carolina. She had lived in Saint-Omer as a child, returned many times during her marriage, and moved back permanently after her husband’s death. Here she fell into serious debt. Unfortunately for her, the adoptive town of which she had always been so fond was one of a small number in the province of Artois where
it was legal both to seize the belongings of a debtor and to imprison them without a warrant, even when the debtor in question was a foreigner. Sommerville was duly taken into custody on 24 May 1786. She complained that she had been humiliatingly arrested in her own home, escorted roughly to prison, followed there by a crowd of curious onlookers.
and refused medication during her few days of incarceration. Robespierre argued her case flamboyantly, claiming that women should be exempt from the draconian law for debtors in Saint-Omer.

The gullibility and inexperience of their sex allows women to enter too lightly into
contracts detrimental to their liberty; their weakness and sensibility means they are more vulnerable to the shame and rigour of imprisonment; the terrible impression imprisonment must make on their natural timidity; the fatal consequences of such treatment, especially
during pregnancy – what more can I say? Women’s delicate honour, publicly, legally, irreversibly debased in the eyes of men whose tenderness disappears along with their respect … What compensation could there be for such inconvenience and cruelty, beyond
simply expediting the payment of a civil debt?\textsuperscript{12}

Robespierre’s opponents were sceptical about his gallantry. Truth and justice, they complained, would not have required such decorative rhetoric. Allegedly, Sommerville had been spotted leaving prison happy and well in the company of a
doctor, and the only change in her condition was that she had been forced to settle some of her debts. In the event, there was no ruling on this case because the special privilege of arresting debtors in Saint-Omer was revoked in August that year. Perhaps this was one of the many occasions on which Robespierre, according to his sister, received no payment.
Instead there was the satisfaction of seeing the law, to which he had so eloquently objected on his client’s behalf, abolished. Even before the Revolution there were many such attempts to rationalise the legal system of the Old Regime, within which Robespierre was fast forging a distinguished, if controversial, career. Already he tended to be verbose and
markedly sentimental. But he also had a ready sneer and could be cuttlingly condescending – skills required by his profession. He was an adversarial advocate, so even though he evoked the principles of eternal truth and justice, it was not his job to be impartial.

Very soon after he began practising law in Arras, Robespierre was chosen as
one of five judges in the Bishop’s Court. In the course of his routine work for this court, he was required to sentence a murderer to death. The death was to be a painful hanging, possibly preceded by a protracted breaking on the wheel, nothing like the comparative speed and merciful efficiency that the invention of the guillotine would later bring. Before the
Revolution, decapitation was considered a privilege, reserved for noble criminals who died as they had lived, carefully segregated from commoners. Robespierre went home that evening to Charlotte in a terrible state with ‘despair in his heart’. He did not eat for two days and paced the house muttering over and over again the thought, ‘I know he is
guilty, that he is a villain, but even so, to cause a man to die ...!’ Intent on proving that Robespierre was anything but the bloodthirsty charlatan vilified by his detractors, Charlotte claimed that he was so disturbed by this case that he resigned his post immediately – a claim not borne out by the facts, since he still held the position in 1788.
Charlotte perhaps exaggerates her brother’s qualms over capital punishment, yet there is no reason to believe that she invented them. Robespierre prided himself on progressive and enlightened views, he would have been familiar with the strong arguments against the death sentence made by eighteenth-century philosophers such as Cesare
Beccaria, and he was squeamish by nature. In an essay published before the Revolution, he argued for extending the privilege of decapitation: ‘a punishment to which we have come to attach a sort of éclat’. Here he anticipated the revolutionary demand for the right to efficient, dignified and equal capital punishment. ‘Crimes of the same kind will
be punished by the same kind of punishment,’ Dr Guillotin would assert in 1789, ‘whatever the rank and status of the guilty man may be.’

In the meantime a reluctant Robespierre went ahead and condemned the murderer to a hideous end – his signature is on the death warrant.

As much as this incident discloses Robespierre’s attitude to capital
punishment, it also reveals his habitual response to nervous strain. Throughout the Revolution he suffered periods of physical and mental collapse, usually precipitated by the need to make an important decision. Sometimes these seem strategic; his enemies were (and remain) convinced that feigning illness was one of the many manipulative
techniques through which he got his own way. But even in Arras he suffered at least one comparable episode of psychosomatic illness. In this early example, as in many later ones, Robespierre struggled to reconcile his public actions with his personal principles and convictions. When this proved impossible, he collapsed, stopped eating, and
brooded obsessively. The demands of public responsibility and power also filled him with anxiety. He was, in important respects, constitutionally and temperamentally ill-suited to assume either — but nevertheless intent on pursuing them both.

Antoine Buissart’s patronage
did not stop with bringing Robespierre legal cases; he also helped him win election to the Academy of Arras, a gathering of the city’s ‘best brains’ meeting regularly to present and discuss academic papers. Established in 1773 on the foundations of a local literary society, the Academy thrived for a decade before Robespierre was invited to join. His inaugural speech in
1784 was devoted to attacking the tradition of bad blood whereby a criminal’s family was shamed and disgraced by association with his or her crime. He wrote up his speech afterwards and entered it in a prize competition organised by the Academy of Metz. Undoubtedly the subject of bad blood evoked the circumstances of
Robespierre’s childhood and the injured pride that dogged him throughout his life. Professionally too he was drawn to ponder the individuation of guilt and the principles and processes through which people apportion blame. Shame by association, he insisted, was simply an extension of the natural tendency to regard all individuals as intimately
connected to their family, friends and fellow citizens, but its implications varied depending on the form of government. He argued that crime in itself was less shameful under a hateful despotism than under democracy. However, it was characteristic of democratic government to treat people as individuals, to liberate them from shame by association, or
at least provide them with opportunities to regain personal dignity through independent acts of merit, heroism and public service. The key to republican or democratic government was patriotic virtue, Robespierre argued: the triumph of the general good over private interests or personal relationships. ‘A man of high principle will be ready to
sacrifice to the State his wealth, his life, his very nature – everything, indeed, except his honour.’

In his essay, Robespierre drew directly on the political theory of Charles de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, who in his *De l’esprit des loix* (*The Spirit of the Laws*, published in 1748) argued that honour was the mainspring of a well-ordered
monarchy, virtue the mainspring of republican government, and fear the mainspring of despotism. Honour and its opposite – shame – made sense under a monarchical form of government where individuals were closely connected to one another through personal and familial loyalties. However, in a democratic republic of
patriotic individuals ready to sacrifice their personal relationships to the public good of the state, could there be any honour at all? This question would return to trouble Robespierre during the Revolution as he tried to put theory into practice, but in this early essay he answered it abstractly, introducing a curious distinction between
‘philosophical honour’ and ‘political honour’. Philosophical honour, as he defined it, was none other than a pure soul’s exquisite sense of its own dignity – an entirely private sentiment based on reason and duty, existing in isolation, far from the vulgar gaze of mankind – a question of purely personal conscience. It was, no doubt, Robespierre’s own
‘philosophical honour’ that caused him to suffer so much when passing the death sentence on a murderer. In contrast, ‘political honour’ of the kind Montesquieu identified in monarchies was the desire for social distinction, grandeur and esteem – more to do with vanity than virtue at an individual level, even if it was useful in producing
unintended social benefits. Here Robespierre showed off his learning, echoing Francis Bacon: ‘No nobles, no monarchy: no monarchy, no nobles.’ And he made the link between the temptation to respect someone merely because he came from a grand or noble family, and the equally irrational or unjust tendency to despise the children of a condemned
man.

As a young lawyer, Robespierre was far from advocating a revolution to establish a new social and political system based on philosophical honour. His essay did suggest that there were serious limitations to monarchies founded on political honour, but if he harboured ideas about the kind of system that might one
day replace the monarchy in France, he kept them to himself. Like almost everyone else, he argued for incremental reform and insisted that ‘there is no need for us to change the whole system of our legislation; it is dangerous to look for the remedy for a specific ill in a general revolution’.\textsuperscript{18} What is more distinctive, however, in this early essay is the close
Robespierre envisaged a connection between politics and morality. He regretted the contempt of those involved in politics for moral precepts, and instead insisted that ‘The laws of God [l’être suprême] need no other sanction than the natural consequences he himself has attached to the audacity of those who infringe them and the fidelity of those who respect them.'
Virtue produces happiness as the sun produces light. Crime results in unhappiness as certainly as filthy insects issue from the heart of corruption.’

The Academy of Metz’s judges had some reservations about Robespierre’s essay, but while they could not bring themselves to award him first prize, they decided to give him a second, equal in
monetary value though not in glory. Robespierre spent the prize money (400 *livres*, approximately £130 today) getting his essay printed.\(^\text{20}\) With retrospect, it is ironic that it was Pierre-Louis Rœderer, an enterprising member of the Metz Parlement, who had donated funds for the prize awarded to Robespierre. Later, looking back on the Revolution,
Rœderer would argue that the French, with their love of social distinctions, were ‘more anti-pathetic than any other people to democracy’. Robespierre, in contrast, would stake his career and his life on the opposite view.

In his essay, Robespierre ranked the personal purity of philosophical honour far above the social benefits of political honour. But was he
deceiving himself? From an early age, social distinction meant a great deal to him: competitive, ambitious, determined, how else could he hope to measure his own hard-won success if not in relation to his peers? An incident at the Academy of Arras gave a hint of his competitive streak. After the death of the Academy’s permanent secretary
Alexandre Harduin in 1785, elections were held to select a replacement. Of the twelve Academicians present, ten voted for a distinguished local landowning noble, Dubois de Fosseux, one for Robespierre, and one for another candidate. Three other officials were elected, Barometer Buissart among them, but once more Robespierre was passed over
with only one vote. Perhaps he voted for himself.

Things became tense with the creation of three new chairs soon after Dubois de Fosseux assumed his post. In considering who should fill them, someone proposed Le Gay, a talented, precocious young lawyer, already winning a reputation as an accomplished poet. At twenty Le Gay had founded his own
literary society in Arras, the Rosati; at twenty-four he was a practising lawyer in the Council of Artois, and was involved on the opposite side from Robespierre in the famous lightning conductor case. When Le Gay’s name was proposed, Robespierre and Buissart were strongly opposed. The evening before the vote was to take place Dubois de Fosseux received a
visit from Robespierre to discuss the matter in private. The next day, when the vote went ahead, the two friends absented themselves from the proceedings. After Le Gay was elected, Buissart threatened to resign his chair. However, Dubois de Fosseux, proving himself a felicitous choice as permanent secretary, refused to be discouraged by such
squabbles and diplomatically restored peace to the Academy.

Why were Robespierre and Buissart so adamantly opposed to Le Gay? Robespierre’s motive may have been simple loyalty to his chief friend and supporter in Arras. Or it might have been more personal rivalry and irritation over Le Gay’s part in the lightning
conductor case. But whatever it was, he showed no reluctance to engage in factional strife. His visit to Dubois de Fosseux the evening before the Academy’s vote foreshadows many such personal visits during the Revolution: ‘If Monsieur Robespierre comes to call, tell him I’m not at home!’ said the great political theorist the abbé Sieyès in his
dotage, years after Robespierre was dead, still haunted by the fear of a knock on the door.

Robespierre’s next attempt to win a literary prize came in 1784 when, for the fourth year running, the Academy of Amiens announced a competition for the best eulogy of the town’s most
famous poet, Jean Baptiste Gresset. None of the submissions had been deemed of high enough quality to merit an award, so Robespierre thought it prudent to solicit strategic advice from Buissart, who had an influential friend in Amiens. This time the prize was worth 1,200 livres (approximately £400), and Robespierre doubtless needed
the cash as much as he yearned for the glory. Gresset was best known for his mock-heroic poem *Ver-Vert*, published in 1734 while he was still a Jesuit priest teaching in Paris at Louis-le-Grand. Soon afterwards he was expelled from the Jesuit order and led a successful secular life writing for the stage, before retiring to Amiens where he lived
austerely, atoning for the frivolity of his youth. Voltaire quipped: ‘Gresset se trompe, il n’est pas si coupable’ – ‘Gresset is wrong, he is not as culpable as all that.’ Ver-Vert is about a parrot, the cloistered pet of one convent, that is sent on a visit to another, learns profane expressions on the way, shocks the nuns on arrival and is sent back in disgrace to
repent and die. Aside from money and glory there was much to attract Robespierre to Gresset as a subject: the connection to Louis-le-Grand, literature, the theatre, birds, and the poet’s celebrated visit to Arras in 1740 when he attended a meeting of the literary society that later became the Academy. Robespierre’s essay drew a flattering comparison
between Gresset and Alexander Pope, pointing out that *The Rape of the Lock* relied on the formulae of epic convention, whereas in his *Ver-Vert* Gresset challenged his imagination to slip through the convent grille and animate the sedate lives of the cloister. Robespierre also claimed to find Gresset’s verse natural, unaffected, and more appealing than
Voltaire’s. He stopped short of placing him on the same level as Rousseau but insisted that he stood out from the crowd of lyrical poets.

Somewhat wistfully, Robespierre quoted Rousseau’s enthusiastic praise of Gresset earlier in the century: ‘What marvel in a man of 26 years! How dismaying for our supposed modern wits!’

Such
affirmation from his revered hero is what Robespierre would have wanted for himself – in 1784, he too was twenty-six years old. He praised Gresset’s respect for religious sentiment, he criticised poets whose work, unlike Gresset’s, harmed the peace and tranquillity of their own and future generations by unleashing terrible irreligious passions. He saw
Gresset as the exception, upholding religion in the face of its critics. Robespierre sincerely approved – the fact that Gresset was expelled from the Jesuit order only added to his admiration: here was a fellow spiritual loner, unafraid to follow his conscience. Nevertheless, with a backward glance perhaps to the wonderful library at Louis-le-Grand, he
described the Jesuit order in very fond and complimentary terms: ‘this famous society … offering such a gentle retreat to men who are devoted to the charms of study and literature. The poet of the Graces [Gresset] formed himself in the shadow of a cloister.’

Despite advice from Amiens via Buissart (overdo the praise since Gresset ‘is
never spoken of here except with veneration, and they think it a crime if one expresses any doubts as to his celebrity’), Robespierre chose to concentrate more on the poet’s outstanding character than on his literary achievements.

I have counted it a merit in Gresset to have drawn upon
himself the sarcasm of a number of literary men; for I have been so bold as to insist upon his virtue, upon his respect for morality, and upon his love of religion. This will undoubtedly expose me to the ridicule of the witty majority; but it will win me two votes
which are more than a recompense – that of my conscience, and that of yours.\(^\text{26}\)

Not for the first or last time, Robespierre identified with a great man whom he believed to be despised, slighted and isolated. There was something more than faintly risible in his repeated insistence that Gresset should
be admired for choosing duty over glory and eschewing worldly trophies that only the vulgar prize, while striving so hard himself to win a literary competition. Besides which, the judges in Amiens could hardly be expected to view their town’s literary celebrity as a vulnerable victim of sarcasm in need of a valiant and virtuous advocate. Robespierre’s eulogy
protested too much and failed to concentrate on the merits of Gresset’s verse. He did not win the prize, but paid to have his essay published even so – perhaps in the hope of making some money from it, perhaps out of wounded pride or vanity. On receiving a copy, Dubois de Fosseux wrote to thank Robespierre in light-hearted verse, politely expressing astonishment that
he had not been awarded the prize, which may or may not have been a comfort to the sensitive and disappointed author.

Robespierre’s literary interests led him to try his hand at poetry. Surviving examples reveal his talent as modest and his sensibility effete, even silly on
occasions. His sister evidently thought so when she advised against publishing a poem about spitting and nose-blowing that might detract from his growing reputation as a lawyer. 27 Most of his poems are addressed to women. The only one published in his lifetime was a madrigal to ‘young and beautiful Ophelia’. It exalted innocent
modesty and ended with the unworldly, indeed positively misleading, piece of advice: ‘You will only be better loved/ if you fear you are not.’

Another began, ‘Do you want to know, Oh! Charming Henriette/ why love is the greatest of gods …?’

There were melancholy lines concerning the marriage of a girl named Émilie to someone else, and more of
the same addressed to the shy beauty Sylvie. Unless these were all synonyms for the same woman or addressed to a figment of Robespierre’s imagination, the young lawyer was busy in Arras composing gallant poetry with little discrimination – he was either frivolously self-indulgent, narrowly focused on improving his poetic skill, or far cooler at heart than his
words imply. An early portrait depicts him with a rose in one hand and the other on his heart, above the motto ‘All for my love’. ‘Which one?’ a cynical recipient of his missives might ask.

Beyond the safe allusiveness of verse, Robespierre’s interaction with women was markedly stilted and formal. In December 1786, for example,
he wrote this letter to accompany a copy of one of his professional speeches – not everyone’s idea of a courting gift.

Madame

I have dared to think that a speech dedicated to the defence of the oppressed would be homage not worthy
of your acceptance, so I have decided to present this to you. The interest you were kind enough to take in the matter that is the subject will suffice to justify this homage, were justification required. In the midst of the painful labours necessitated by this work, you, Madame,
were with me during some moments that I shall never forget, and your presence renewed my courage. Today, when I have finished my work, I seek the reward that is its due, and find it in offering this to you ...  

There is considerably more in
this letter about the sender than the recipient. His gratitude is well expressed, but the woman concerned is not invoked personally; her contribution is defined solely in relation to Robespierre’s own work. And yet, if he was emotionally self-absorbed, his theoretical views were egalitarian and feminist far ahead of the times. A woman’s contribution to
academic discussion, he argued in one of his papers to the Academy of Arras, was the natural complement to a man’s and of equal value. For this reason he thought members of both sexes should be admitted to the Academy.\textsuperscript{31}

Shy and reserved in character, busy and ambitious at work, socialising primarily with other men,
Robespierre’s opportunities to build friendships with women, romantic or otherwise, must have been limited. One friend of Charlotte’s bred some canaries for him, and received in return a letter of thanks that was both mildly flirtatious and faintly disturbing.

What was our surprise
when, approaching their cage, we saw them dash themselves against the wires with an impetuosity which made us tremble for their lives! That is what they do whenever they see the hand that feeds them. What plan of education have you adopted with them,
and from where have they acquired their wild character? … A face like yours, has it not reconciled the canaries to the human countenance? Or is it that they can support the sight of no other, having once seen it?\textsuperscript{32}

According to Charlotte, many women were interested
in her brother and he could have easily made an advantageous marriage with one of the local heiresses. But at the time, his sister claimed, there was only one girl he wanted to marry. This was Anais Deshorties, the stepdaughter of one of their aunts on the de Robespierre side of the family. Perhaps Robespierre, rather sensitive and awkward, found it easier
to contemplate intimacy with a member of his extended family. Even so, he courted Anais for two or three years without making much progress, in strong contrast to his father’s conduct at a similar age. Two letters sent in June 1787 to an unnamed girl, who may have been Anais, show Robespierre sad and dejected. The first alludes to a rejection:
As to the cruelties that your letter contains, I will respond by honestly exposing my feelings. The interest I take in people does not have a fixed term, when they are people like you. That which you inspire in all those who know to appreciate you, will not cease in me until I
do, because I do not know anyone more deserving of it than you. In addition, the goodness that is always clear in your dealings with me places me under a sort of obligation, and to abjure such a feeling would make me unjust and ungrateful, and I wish to be neither …
This is the letter of someone with pretty contorted emotions. The undying fidelity in response to the beloved’s perceived cruelty, the peculiar sense of duty, the self-righteous integrity, and above all, the self-regard, are highly reminiscent of the love letters in Rousseau’s novel *La Nouvelle Héloïse*.\(^{34}\) Published in Paris in 1761, this astonishingly popular novel –
in France alone there were seventy-two editions before the end of the century – tells the story of Julie, who loves the unsuitable Saint-Preux, but in the end renounces passion in favour of a virtuous life of marriage and motherhood. Rousseau described the process of writing it in his *Confessions*: ‘Forgetting the entire human race, I invented for myself
whole companies of perfect creatures, whose virtue was as celestial as their beauty, and of true, tender and faithful friends, such as I had never known here below.’

Rousseau projected his own romantic passions into Saint-Preux – whose letters could have served as models for Robespierre’s:

An indefinably sweet
and consoling idea eases my suffering in being far from you, when I think that you have commanded it. The pain you cause me is less cruel than if fortune had sent it. If it serves to make you happy, I would be sorry not to have felt it. It is the guarantee of its reward, for I
know your soul too well to believe you capable of cruelty for its own sake.\textsuperscript{36}

Robespierre’s second letter to the unnamed woman from June 1787 further suggests the influence of Rousseau: ‘The situation in which you are does not matter to me, providing you are happy. But are you? I doubt it
a little and this doubt afflicts me, since when one is not personally happy, one consoles oneself with the happiness of others, one wants at least to see those who most deserve it enjoy happiness …  

So much earnest renunciation! Yet if these letters were addressed to Anais, as Charlotte’s testimony suggests, what were the insurmountable
obstacles to Robespierre’s love? Were his feelings not reciprocated? Did he think he had to further establish himself professionally and financially before proposing marriage? Or did he, like Rousseau, project his most intense feelings into a one-sided relationship that was really only part of his fantasy life and elaborate self-image? Charlotte claimed that when
he returned to Arras in 1791 for his first visit since the Revolution and found Anais married to another local lawyer, he was heartbroken. In his sister’s eyes, Anais, fickle and cruel, was entirely to blame for the failure of the relationship. But it seems possible that Robespierre gave her only very scant and confused grounds for hope. He was – as Rousseau had
been — exceptionally self-absorbed.

Robespierre’s early love poems may have had little or nothing to do with actual romantic entanglements in Arras, but one certain source of his inspiration was his membership of an elite literary society, the Rosati. This was the society founded by the lawyer Le Gay, with whom Robespierre probably
patched up his quarrel. The Rosati met every June in a garden at Blanzy on the banks of the river Scarpe. The meetings were languid and foppish affairs involving ceremonial smelling of roses, courteous exchanges of light-hearted verse, singing, a bit of dancing perhaps and elegant al fresco consumption of good food and wine. Dubois de Fosseux said of
Robespierre at this time: ‘One cannot but acknowledge his fitness for membership of the Rosati when one sees him taking part in the pastoral revels of the village, and enlivening the dancers by his presence. See! The god of eloquence himself mixes familiarly with mortals, and reveals, beneath the shepherd’s smock, the gleam of his divinity.’

Queen
Marie Antoinette, organising her courtly attendants into charming pastoral tableaux in the woods around Versailles, was aiming for similar aesthetic effects, though the image of Robespierre prancing on the village green in a shepherd’s smock is considerably more incongruous.

Rosati is an anagram of Artois, and with its stylised
rituals the society may have been linked to one of the local freemason lodges – both Robespierre and Le Gay were members of the Hesdin lodge, and Robespierre’s grandfather had been a prominent founder of freemasonry in Arras. However, the evidence suggests that whatever else might have been going on (and where freemasonry is
concerned it is notoriously difficult to tell), Robespierre’s involvement in the Rosati was largely motivated by personal friendship and literary interest. The rather camp initiation rites involved the postulant waiting in a private bower to be presented with a rose, inhaling the fragrance three times, pinning the flower on his jacket, and
downing a glass of wine flavoured with rose petals before receiving welcoming embraces and speeches from existing members. Rosati members adopted cross-gendered pseudonyms: one lawyer was known as ‘Sylvie’ – the shy beauty, perhaps, addressed in Robespierre’s poem, which also evoked ‘the noble and brilliant rose’, queen of flowers.
Robespierre’s long acceptance speech to the society, ‘Eloge de la Rose’, concludes: ‘It is happiness that I wish for you. Such happiness awaits you if, true to the charm of your vocation, you prove zealous in fulfilling the sacred obligations it imposes on you, in short: love the rose, love your brothers; these two precepts contain the whole
law ... *In his duobus tota lex est.*

The manuscript for this affected piece of mumbo-jumbo is full of careful crossings-out and rewordings. Robespierre evidently cared about impressing his fellow society members. He was hardly a natural sybarite and the image of him lying on a river bank, composing love poems and joining in drinking
games, is difficult to reconcile with the nervous austerity that characterised him from early youth to the end of his life. But at this stage he was open to every opportunity for bettering himself that came along. If friends he had made through the Academy of Arras invited him to join their Rosati society, he joined it. If this meant writing silly poems, he
wrote them. Maybe he even enjoyed it; Rosati meetings were not the only occasions on which he participated enthusiastically in sentimental rituals – during the Revolution he even invented several of his own.

Early in 1789 Robespierre had another opportunity to align himself with the forces
of progress. The soldier M. Dupond was a victim of familial injustice. Decades earlier, Dupond had deserted the French army and served in those of Sweden and Denmark for over twenty years before returning home to Artois to claim his share of a wealthy uncle’s legacy. His relatives flatly refused to recognise his claims, and when it became clear that the
outraged Dupond could not be silenced, they obtained one of the notorious *lettres de cachet* against him. Once issued, these official documents allowed imprisonment without trial for an indefinite period of anyone deemed a nuisance: insistent creditors, cuckolded husbands, errant children and so forth. These letters were a form of privilege, very easy
for influential noblemen to obtain, and as such one of the most hated abuses in Old Regime France – the means by which so many innocents found themselves locked up in prisons like the Bastille. When Dickens’s Dr Manette is ‘recalled to life’ at the beginning of *A Tale of Two Cities*, he has been buried inside the Bastille for almost eighteen years by a *lettre de
cachet, ‘a privilege that ... the boldest people are afraid to speak of in a whisper’. 41

After Dupond was at last released from prison, he engaged Robespierre to press his original claim on the family money. The ambitious young lawyer seized this opportunity for a broadly focused attack on the lettres de cachet and the corrupt system that issued them. In
pleading Dupond’s case, Robespierre called upon Louis XVI to complete the work of his illustrious predecessors and move France forward to reasonable, virtuous reform:

To lead men to happiness through virtue, and to virtue by a legislation founded on eternal
principles of justice, and so framed as to restore human nature to all its rights and all its dignity; to renew the immortal compact which is to bind man to his Creator and to his fellow citizens, by removing all the causes of oppression which now create throughout the world
fear, distrust, meanness, selfishness, hatred and cupidity; behold, Sire, the glorious mission to which you are called. 42

Robespierre wrote this plea in February, just months before the outbreak of the Revolution. In 1789 he was far from alone in expecting,
or at least hoping, that the king would play a major part in bringing about the changes that were so urgently needed in France. What isolated him from his contemporaries was the degree to which, over the following five years – extraordinary years of revolt, turmoil, hunger, war and execution – he strove to make the project he had outlined for Louis XVI his own.
Part II

The Revolution Begins

(1788–1789)
Standing for Election in Arras

BETWEEN 8 MAY and 8 August
1788, France changed for ever. A chasm opened at the centre of power – a void from which the unimaginable might arise, even a revolution to shake the world. On 8 May the monarchy, in a desperate effort to reaffirm its authority after years of mounting fiscal and administrative disarray, sent the Parlement of Paris a set of edicts outlining comprehensive reforms to the
structure of the state. These edicts sought to remodel and diminish the powers of the parlements: the thirteen supreme courts of law, spread throughout the kingdom. The Conseil d’Artois in Arras, the grandest of the courts in which Robespierre worked, was a distinguished judicial body, exercising some of the same functions as the parlements, but unlike them it
did not have supreme jurisdiction.

Under the Old Regime, the *parlements* had legal, policing and political responsibilities. They were composed mainly, though not exclusively, of nobles, who had often used personal wealth to buy themselves public office. The *parlements* were highly privileged, conservative in disposition,
self-interested and profligate. To their critics, they seemed to go out of their way to defend brutal and inefficient criminal laws or oppressive feudal rights, while responding with reactionary suspicion to innovation in the arts and sciences. Notoriously, the Parlement of Paris had banned inoculation against smallpox within its area of jurisdiction – a third
of all France. The *parlements* were also a thorn in the side of the monarchy because they had the power to deflect or impede royal edicts by simply refusing to register them as laws. Often they produced inflammatory *remonstrances* arguing their case, and over the course of the eighteenth century they became the focal point for opposition to the monarchy. When Louis XVI
inherited the crown in 1775, he found that his predecessor had resorted to exiling the troublesome *parlements*. However, the new king immediately recalled them, declaring, ‘It may be considered politically unwise, but it seems to me that it is the general will.’

Louis XVI’s words proved prescient, because as the century drew to its close,
conflict between his government and the parlement (and the doctrines which lent them legitimacy, the thèse royale and thèse nobiliaire) reached a dangerous deadlock. Successive royal governments had attempted to institute programmes of desperately needed fiscal and administrative reform, only to founder, sooner or later, on
resistance from the parlements. The Parlement of Bordeaux, for example, refused in May 1788 to register edicts introducing freer trade in grain until they were clarified. But whilst the parlements could obstruct royal edicts, they had no power to initiate change for the better in France. This was the crux of the problem: even well-intentioned

and
progressive royal edicts were treated with suspicion by the parlements, determined as they were to retain and exercise their right to oppose the monarch. France was an absolute monarchy, so rights of opposition were few and far between. The parlements attracted popular interest and support for standing up to Louis XVI’s governments, even when the reforms they
obstructed were sensible. In the meantime, the country teetered on the brink of bankruptcy, with a public debt of well over four billion livres.²

This immense public debt was caused by the unjust system of taxation that exempted members of the two privileged orders – the Clergy and the Nobility – and burdened everyone else in the
Third Estate with taxes which many could not afford to pay. The debt had been aggravated by the expense of the Seven Years War (which ended in 1763) and France’s involvement in the American Revolution. Lavish public spending, at the court in Versailles and elsewhere, had further compounded the problem. Taxation was at the centre of the protracted and
damaging struggles between the monarch and the parlements. After the end of the Seven Years War, the parlements vigorously opposed the continuance of wartime taxes. Later they opposed the extension of stamp duty and the establishment of any new permanent taxes. They did this under the popular mantle of objecting to the monarch’s
absolute power, but the outcome was the continuing oppression of the Third Estate and the frightening prospect of state bankruptcy.

This was the deadlock that the king’s spokesman, Chrétien François de Lamoignon, aimed to break once and for all on 8 May 1788. Lamoignon was the Keeper of the Seals, a prominent and well-
connected nobleman, an intellectual with an unusually long face, who found himself in Louis XVI’s ministry at the worst of times. Six months earlier, with the nearly bankrupt royal treasury forced to borrow an additional 420 million livres, but haughtily unwilling to explain precisely why, Lamoignon had stood before the Parlement of Paris.
These principles, universally acknowledged by the entire kingdom, are that the King alone must possess the sovereign power in his kingdom; that He is answerable only to God in the exercise of
his power; that the tie which binds the King to the Nation is by nature indissoluble; that the interests and reciprocal obligations between the King and his subjects serve only to reassure that union; that the Nation’s interest is that the powers of its head not be altered; that the
King is the chief sovereign of the Nation and everything he does is with her interests in mind; and that finally the legislative power resides in the person of the King independent of and unshared with all other powers. These, sirs, are the
unchanging powers of the French Monarchy.\textsuperscript{3}

This was a clear, bold statement of the basis on which Louis XVI held power, or at least thought he did. In retrospect it seems mere wishful thinking.

On 8 May Lamoignon set out from his grand house in the Marais Quarter, where
literati like Racine and Mme de Sévigné had once come to dine, across an elegant courtyard and through the strong arched gate, to break the power of the institutions that had long formed the bastions of noble privilege in France. He intended to defeat the parlements by introducing an attractive programme of reform, but simultaneously reasserting the absolute
power of the monarchy. The edicts that Lamoignon presented to the Parlement of Paris on 8 May revived earlier attempts to transfer ultimate judicial authority from the parlements to the royal council, or, as Lamoignon proposed, a new plenary court. They introduced much-needed reform of the criminal code, substantial restructuring of
the judicial system, the end of the *parlements*’ involvement in legislation, and an attempt to centralise the legislative process. As a precaution, the Parlement of Paris was dismissed soon after these edicts had been announced, and told not to reconvene until further notice. At first, in Paris and the provinces, there was shock – a stunned realisation that the long-
threatened coup against the parlements had finally occurred – and then there was uproar. Lawyers throughout the country rejected the new judicial arrangements. People took to the streets and some demonstrations turned riotous – mobs controlled parts of Rennes, people were killed in Grenoble, lettres de cachet were flying everywhere, trying in vain to silence the
parlements and their supporters. Amidst the chaos, there was mounting clamour for a meeting of the Estates General, the nation’s largest representative body, which had not met since 1614. By now, it was widely hoped that the fiscal and administrative crises in the kingdom could be resolved by this extraordinary representative assembly, as had happened,
allegedly at least, on several occasions in the very distant past. On 5 July the royal government tried to deflect attention from the contentious Lamoignon Edicts by announcing that the king would welcome his people’s views on how the Estates General should be organised when – if – they finally met.

As a member of the Bishop’s Court in Arras,
Robespierre joined his local legal colleagues in protesting against the Lamoignon Edicts. In recent years he had argued passionately for reform of the criminal code and judicial system, yet in siding with the parlements against the government he was in fact arguing for the perpetuation of privilege – against the erosion of the parlements’ established
rights, and against the government’s attempted reforms. This made sense in a situation where the parlements were still the most promising sites of opposition to the absolute monarchy. The full scale of imminent change in France was still unimaginable. There was nothing new for a provincial lawyer like Robespierre to play for yet, so in May 1788
he dutifully – perhaps even somewhat cynically – joined the demonstration of support for the *parlements*, knowing, as everyone knew, that they were highly improbable promoters of a less corrupt regime, but still the strongest site of opposition to the monarch’s absolute power.

Looking back in 1792, Robespierre presented his behaviour in Arras rather
differently to his revolutionary colleagues, claiming that even though he was nothing more than a humble official in a provincial court, he had challenged the Lamoignon Edicts on the grounds that they contravened the sacred principle of the sovereignty of the people. He compared himself favourably with members of larger, grander
judicial bodies, who had opposed the Edicts on more superficial grounds, objecting merely to the form of the administrative changes. In this way Robespierre backdated his revolutionary career, his unswerving commitment to the people, his incorruptible patriotism, to the spring of 1788, when signs of the gathering political turmoil first reached
Arras. Yet the people were far from sovereign in France in 1788. It was the king who possessed the sovereign power, as Lamoignon had recently reminded the Parlement of Paris, and he answered only to God. When Robespierre joined the protest in support of the parlements, he could not have known that the country was months away from a revolution that would
alter everything by seizing power from the king and transferring it to the people.

On 13 July bad weather added to the disruption unleashed by the Lamoignon Edicts. A violent summer storm rained enormous hailstones over northern France, some big enough to kill people and livestock caught in fields without shelter, and destroy most of
the grain awaiting harvest. The harvest of 1788 was going to be meagre even before the disastrous storm, and the previous year’s harvest had been poor too. The country was facing its second severe winter in a row; there would be hunger, destitution and the threat of starvation; peasants would be unable to pay their taxes, and the royal treasury would find
itself bankrupt. Nevertheless, attention was temporarily distracted from these harsh prospects on 8 August, when Louis XVI at last agreed to convene the Estates General. The meeting was set for 1 May 1789 at Versailles. The king’s announcement was quickly followed by a flood of speculation about how exactly the Estates General should be organised.
Within weeks, the downfall of the king’s ministers, Lamoignon included, and the arrival of the realm’s anticipated plunge into bankruptcy, lent still more urgency – and hope – to these popular speculations.

Ever since he had raised the enormous loan of 420 million livres in November 1787, Lamoignon had been able to reassure his
colleagues whenever they nervously asked him, ‘Do we have the cash?’ But by August 1788 the cash was completely gone. The royal treasury had no choice but to suspend payments, government funds plummeted and the markets panicked. On 24 August, Louis XVI recalled the Swiss banker Jacques Necker from exile, in the hope that he could rescue
the regime from its wreckage. Though foreign and a Protestant, Necker had risen to high office as director-general of finances earlier in Louis XVI’s reign. His policy of borrowing rather than raising taxes to finance state expenditure had proved successful in the short term, but had not solved the country’s ongoing financial crisis. Necker had been
dismissed in 1781. Now Paris was jubilant at his recall after Lamoignon, the scourge of the parlements, fell from power. While Necker’s portrait swayed through the unruly streets above a triumphant procession, an effigy of Lamoignon was reviled and burned outside the splendid family residence in the Marais from which the man himself had fled. The
following year Lamoignon shot himself. It may have been an accident. It may have been suicide.

When the Parlement of Paris was recalled in September 1788, after Lamoignon’s fall, it discredited itself once and for all as an advocate of progress by calling upon Louis XVI to reconvene the Estates General exactly as it had been
composed in 1614. In 1614 the Estates General had met in three almost numerically equal, but separately elected, chambers representing the orders of the Clergy, the Nobility and the Third Estate. They had voted separately by order, and it was easy for the Nobility and the Clergy to defeat the Third Estate: two against one. Since 1614 the Third Estate had grown
exponentially in numbers and wealth: it now represented 98 per cent of the population, including the rising tax-paying bourgeoisie. So it would be severely under-represented if the Estates General were assembled as they had been in 1614, as the Parlement of Paris demanded. The popular credit the parlements had won through their clashes with the
monarch disappeared overnight. Suddenly Robespierre was vitriolic in his denunciations of these old legal institutions. His fury marks the speed with which things were changing, personal chagrin at the small part he had played in shoring up the old order, and a passionate desire to exchange it for something new. Such sudden and violent feelings
were far from unique at the time; they were everywhere, and the anger to which he was particularly prone was widespread in the last months of the Old Regime.

Robespierre was one of thousands to publish a pamphlet with ideas on how the promised Estates General should be organised – many of them calling for doubling the number of Third Estate
representatives, and for counting the votes by head, not by order. Instead of arguing for the historical, constitutional or theoretical rights of the Third Estate nationwide, Robespierre’s pamphlet had a specific, local focus. It was preoccupied with the Estates of Artois, the provincial governing body grandly accommodated inside the city walls of Arras, and its
standing claim to represent the province of Artois. This claim had to be undermined if the province’s deputies to the Estates General were to be newly elected. Unless the claim of the Estates of Artois to represent the province could be overridden, Robespierre had no hope of going to Versailles as a representative of the Third Estate the following year.
What a difference in just three months! Instead of turning out for a local demonstration under the Old Regime where there were such unbreachable limits to his ambitions, Robespierre was now within reach of a role in national politics. His recognition of this opportunity – and the ferocity of his determination to seize it – was amazing. In the past
he had commented on politics when it intersected with his legal work, or arose in the context of his prize essays, and he was certainly well schooled in the political theory of both Montesquieu and Rousseau, but there had been no hope whatsoever of even a minor role in national politics. Contemporaries in Arras noted with surprise (and some distaste) the vigour
with which Robespierre started campaigning for election. He had had very limited, and largely dismaying, experience of elections before, in the Academy of Arras and the legal profession. He knew there was only one outcome that counted – winning – and in his circumstances, luck was not going to be enough.
What was Arras like on the eve of the Revolution? We can visit it as it was at that time if we travel with Arthur Young, an English gentleman farmer from Norfolk and a pioneer of political science. In 1788 Young bought a mare in Bury St Edmunds, confidently assured that she would be fit for at least a year. He had travelled in France before as guest of a
noble family, but this time he went like a farmer, alone, on horseback, without servants. On 30 July he left his estate in Bradfield, crossed the channel and arrived in Calais. Then he took the road to Saint-Omer, where he found ‘little deserving of notice’, and on from there to ‘Aire, and Lillers, and Béthune; towns well known in military story’.
By 8 August Young was on the ‘admirable gravel road’ between Béthune and Arras. When he reached it later that day, Arras proved another disappointment, and he noted in his journal, ‘… there is nothing but the great and rich Abbey of Var [Saint-Vaast], which they would not show me; it was not the right day, or some frivolous excuse’.  

6 He went off
grumpily through the narrow streets. If he had turned left, then left again, he would have walked past Robespierre’s front door on the corner of the rue des Rapporteurs and might unknowingly have passed him returning from work that day. But Young’s mood was ruined and he refused to be impressed even by the town’s imposing gothic cathedral. At the end
of his long day he wrote dismissively in his journal, ‘The cathedral is nothing,’ and blew out his candle, tired and disgruntled. The next morning he woke to a city transformed by market day:

Coming out of the town I met at least an hundred asses, some loaded with a bag, others a sack, but all
apparently with a trifling burden, and swarms of men and women. This is called a market, being plentifully supplied; but a great proportion of all the labour of a country is idle in the midst of harvest, to supply a town which in England would be fed by one-fortieth of
the people. Whenever this swarm of triflers buzz in a market, I take a minute and vicious division of the soil for granted.\textsuperscript{7}

Young was a serious agronomist with strong views on the merits of large-scale farming over small – hence his disapproval of the petty farmers converging on the
market with their meagre burdens. He also had wider criticisms of the society and politics he found in France. He despised the despotic government that seemed to take no account of public opinion and the oppressive system of privilege by which the First and Second Estates lived at the expense of the Third. On his travels in the south of the country, he
noted, ‘All the country girls and women are without shoes or stockings; and the ploughmen at their work have neither sabots nor stockings to their feet. This is a poverty that strikes at the root of national prosperity … It reminded me of the misery of Ireland.’\(^8\) These glaring grievances, so obvious to an attentive English visitor, were prominent causes of the
Revolution that was just months away as Young prepared to depart from Arras. On leaving the city, he continued on his way across France: wry, sarcastic, disabused, refusing whenever possible to be remotely impressed. He was still there when the Revolution came. He welcomed it, suspended his sarcasm, and hoped the problems he had noticed on
his travels were about to be resolved.

When the provincial government, the Estates of Artois, met in Arras in December 1788, the price of grain was rising dramatically and a winter of misery was setting in. Poverty was a widespread and complex problem in Old Regime
France – there was an extensive and nuanced vocabulary to refer to different levels of deprivation, but the blanket term was *pauvre*. The poor made up over a third of the total population and were identified as ‘The family of a working man where such an individual cannot earn enough to support every member and where the
individual members cannot support themselves.’ At best these people lived at subsistence level. A bad harvest would make many of them destitute – without adequate food, clothing and shelter, they would soon die. These were the circumstances in which Robespierre began his election campaign. His pamphlet, À la nation artésienne, sur la nécessité de
reformer les États d’Artois (To the nation of Artois, on the necessity of reforming the Estates of Artois), argues that everything wrong in Artois was the fault of the provincial Estates – and that the only hope of purging corruption from local politics was popular election of the people’s own representatives.¹⁰ The provincial Estates had
monopolised for their own benefit public powers that rightfully belonged to the people.

In this early pamphlet, Robespierre’s two most prominent political ideas are already present. It is here that he first presents the principle of election that was to characterise so many of his interventions early in the Revolution. This principle
was based on a simple and inflexible understanding of what representation must mean in politics: in order to represent a person, or a group of people, you must first be chosen by them. According to him, the bishops in the Estates of Artois represented no one because no one had chosen them for the purpose. Nobles and members of the Third Estate, chosen by the
elite, represented only the elite. The poor, meanwhile, were so preoccupied with scraping a living that they had no time to reflect on the causes of their discontent, or the natural rights of which they were being cheated by the unrepresentative Estates of Artois. This sense of the poor as deserving claimants of justice in a corrupt and unfair world is the second of
Robespierre’s prominent political ideas. In Artois, he argued that the tyranny of wealthy elites excluded the poor from litigation. In recent years, he had built a professional reputation in the courts for taking on unprofitable individual cases for relatively impoverished clients, but here already the poor have become a collective abstraction,
enshrined in his rhetoric, soon to be unleashed in debates that reverberated far beyond Arras.

Unscrupulous, abusive and egotistical ‘enemies of the people’ were vividly present to Robespierre from the start of his political career. He called on justice, reason and humanity to vindicate the oppressed: the moment had come at last for
vice to tremble and for virtue
to put Arras, Artois, France, perhaps even the world beyond, to rights. In the thick of his election campaign, he attacked the members of the Estates of Artois for refusing reasonable requests for public expenditure on education or sanitation to alleviate public misery while approving the refurbishment of their own offices to the sum of 2,400
livres although they occupied them for just six weeks a year. He scorned the officials who refused to allot public funds for repairing important roads, imposed forced labour on peasants to maintain the roads free of charge, and then provocatively approved the construction of a new trunk road across the province – a completely pointless expenditure, except that it
passed a château owned by a member of the provincial administration. The corruption was so transparent that once the road had reached the château, work on it stopped. And this was far from an isolated instance of abuse.

In his pamphlet, Robespierre also denounced these enemies of the people for oppressing their victims
with *lettres de cachet* and imprisoning them. He championed the rights of citizens rotting unjustly inside the Bastille of Artois (as he titled the city prison), thanks to the odious caprice of provincial officials who were no better than local despots. He lamented the fate of men, women and children thrown into prison like animals – even pregnant women,
‘innocent victims of vile persecution’ – and claimed there was not a mother in the province who could not make her son cower merely by mentioning the Estates of Artois. Having thus demonised and defamed the provincial government, Robespierre was certain the people of Artois would choose to change their representatives. The choice
facing the people, as he presented it, was between liberty and slavery, happiness and oppression, victory and defeat. The pamphlet’s implicit message was ‘Vote for Robespierre’. Essentially, he conducted his election campaign as if he were already living in a democracy, as if there were popular suffrage, as if politics were open to anyone the
people had chosen. None of this was true, but through sheer force of imagination Robespierre continued to suspend his own disbelief. Into his mind there had come the first of many pictures: Robespierre, delegate to the Estates General. He was greatly helped in realising this ambition by the king’s decree on 7 March that Artois was to select its
representatives to Versailles by holding new elections, in line with the rest of France – it was not simply to rely on the Estates of Artois to choose them. And so the Estates of Artois, the long-time emblem of regional privilege and independence, had been superseded; the first great obstacle in Robespierre’s path had melted away.
Nevertheless, his chances of election were slight. Because the Estates General had last met in 1614, no one remembered exactly how its delegates had been chosen. Louis XVI told his ministers to consult the archives, but this did not get them far since much had been left to local discretion in 1614: there was no coherent codification of the procedures. So the king’s
minister Necker had to invent one. The electoral statute that resulted was an uneasy attempt to reconcile ‘respect for customary practice’ with ‘current circumstances’.\textsuperscript{11} It decreed that the Clergy and the Nobility would choose their delegates through direct elections. However, the Third Estate was to elect deputies indirectly, through a series of preliminary assemblies that
would allow rural communities and traditional artisan guilds to participate. The number of deputies for each region was decided on the principle of proportional representation ‘according to their population and resources’. An exception was made for Paris, for which Necker designed a special electoral procedure – even more complicated. Those
eligible to participate in the Third Estate’s elections included all male commoners, born or naturalised in France, aged over twenty-five, and listed on the tax rolls. Voting was commonly by open ballot, and an absolute majority was required to win.

On Monday 23 March Robespierre attended a meeting at his old school, the Collège d’Arras, for all the
members of the Third Estate who did not belong to one of the city’s thirty-nine trade guilds or corporations (apothecaries, carpenters, tailors, wig-makers and so on). Whereas the corporations met calmly and elected their representatives without any trouble, the meeting in the college church was chaotic. It got off to an unpromising start, with people turning up
slowly between seven and nine thirty in the morning. Soon afterwards, a bitter fight erupted between the ordinary people who comprised the Third Estate and the échevins, or town councillors – who, in Robespierre’s opinion, were at least as suspect as the members of the old Estates of Artois had been.¹² He attacked these councillors for corruption by association
with the Estates of Artois, which had allowed councillors to attend meetings of the Third Estate. This practice was continuing despite the recent demise of the Estates of Artois. In their defence the councillors argued that they were as entitled as any other members of the Third Estate to a part in the election of its deputies.

After two long days of
deliberation, twelve deputies were chosen to draw up a list of the Third Estate’s grievances \((\text{cahier de doléance})\) and go on to the next electoral assembly. Robespierre was one of the twelve and so was his friend Buissart. As Robespierre put it, ‘the people expressed their joy loudly in multiple applause, imposing, no doubt, a great responsibility on those
whom it honoured with these touching and energetic proofs of its confidence’. In this rapturous account, however, Robespierre was ahead of himself – this was just the first stage of elections for the Third Estate and there were still three to go. At the next election meeting, a few days later, in the college church again, fifty-three deputies from the corporations joined
the Third Estate’s twelve approved candidates. At this time, as well as helping to draw up the general grievances of the Third Estate, Robespierre agreed to draft a list of specific grievances for the corporation of cobblers. Since this was one of the most impoverished and illiterate of the corporations, he may have been motivated by his
habitual sympathy with the poor. But he was also eager to broaden the base of his potential supporters: so early in the electoral process no effort was too speculative, no publicity or source of support too insubstantial.

The fight with the town councillors came to a head in an argument between Robespierre and his old mentor at the Academy,
Dubois de Fosseux, over a change in protocol. Dubois de Fosseux, himself a councillor, was also a member of the ‘noblesse non entrante’, a person whose family had attained nobility comparatively recently. He was wealthy and less provincial than Robespierre, having spent six years at court in Versailles and developed a taste for
literature and the theatre, about which he corresponded with Beaumarchais (already famous for his play *Le Mariage de Figaro*, the inspiration for Mozart’s opera). As secretary of the Academy, Dubois de Fosseux had many other correspondents from all over France. He was highly respected for his public service in Arras, his
involvement in improving roads and canals and his attempts to monitor and resolve local economic crises. He was present in the assembly of the Third Estate (in addition to the assembly of the Nobility) because he held municipal office. He disputed the relentlessly pejorative terms in which the councillors were characterised by Robespierre,
in particular. This bitter, time-wasting dispute raged for three days, and on 29 March the Third Estate of Arras had still not elected its deputies to the key meeting of the Third Estate of the whole district, or bailliage, which was scheduled for the following day. The election was finally held in the middle of the night. Of the twenty-four who were chosen, four were
councillors and the majority were lawyers. Robespierre came fourteenth on the list.

The next morning the tired new deputies returned to the college church (if they had left it at all overnight) to welcome representatives of the other 245 constituencies of the bailliage, with a view to further amalgamating the province’s extensive lists of grievances. The list presented
by the twenty-four representatives of the Third Estate of Arras bore signs of Robespierre’s influence. It included a complaint against the shaming of the families of criminals by their association with bad blood, the subject of Robespierre’s inaugural speech at the Academy of Arras, and several other suggestions for reform of the criminal code. Perhaps it is
true, as one hostile biographer claimed, that at this time Robespierre organised his country relatives in Carvins into campaigning on his behalf. Or perhaps the representatives from the countryside, escaping from a stronger sense of oppression than their counterparts in urban Arras, proved more responsive to Robespierre’s dramatic rhetoric. Whatever
the reason, when the 550 representatives from across the whole province voted, he was one of just 49 chosen to draft the final, most comprehensive list of grievances for the Third Estate. Even Robespierre himself could not tell whether it was luck, strategy or a combination of both which had won him this opportunity. Within the assembly, he
continued to align himself with radical democratic proposals, defending, for example, the idea of reimbursing those delegates who usually lived off their earnings for income lost during the elections. Never one to drop a fight, he asked sarcastically: ‘Do you think the councillors will not find an objection to this demand? They will reply that it appears
just, but that they oppose it on form.’ Only a quarter of the 550 delegates could go through to the next stage – the final assembly of the Third Estate from which the representatives to Versailles would be chosen. Robespierre’s name went forward for the final meeting at which he might still be chosen for Versailles. It was at this point, waiting
nervously, that he wrote a second political pamphlet, characteristically entitled *Les ennemis de la patrie démasqués* (The Enemies of the Country Unmasked), which recounted his experiences of elections in recent months, and reviled anyone who had stood in the way of his candidature. It ended in high style:
One trembles when one sees the causes behind the choosing of representatives who will decide the destiny of the nation. May God keep us from such vain causes, and inspire in all citizens the spirit of righteousness, truth, courage and disinterestedness, the
celestial love of humanity, and that healthy passion for the public good on which depend the happiness of the people and the safety of empires.  

Because of the timing of Easter, an important consideration in devout Artois, it was not until 20 April that the Third Estate
met with the Nobility and the Clergy to hear Mass in the Abbey of Saint-Vaast, swear a solemn oath before the Bishop, and separate again to choose their representatives by ballot. There had been no assembly on this scale at Arras within living memory. Considerable sums of money were spent preparing the cathedral and perfuming the halls in which the Estates
would meet, surrounded by tapestries. When the chairman of the Third Estate proposed sending an amiable greeting to the other two orders, Robespierre immediately opposed it: what was there to congratulate them on? In his retrospective account of 1792, he cited this episode as another instance of his having upheld the principle of the sovereignty
of the people, just as he had done against the Lamoignon Edicts.

Divisions not merely *between*, but also *within* each of the three orders dominated the elections in Artois, as they dominated elections elsewhere in France. Across the country the higher and lower clergy were divided. Differently ranked nobles were divided. And the Third
Estate, as Robespierre had seen, was riven with divisions. In all three Estates the deputies elected to the Estates General were chosen primarily because they were known to have opposed government directives in recent years, Robespierre among them. Dubois de Fosseux attended the meeting of the nobility and drafted their grievances, but he did
not stand as a candidate for election because his mother was gravely ill and he did not want to be separated from her for months to come. He remained behind and resumed the wide network of correspondence he had developed since becoming secretary of the Academy of Arras. In this role he was invaluable as witness and recorder of revolutionary
change across France.

By 30 April Robespierre was sure at last that he had been chosen fifth as one of the Third Estates’ eight representatives from Arras. The elected deputies were due in Versailles in a matter of days for the ceremonial opening of the Estates General on 4 May. Robespierre would have been happy to leave even sooner.
The maid who helped him pack remembered that he had very few clothes and belongings: a bag of powder and a puff for his meticulously maintained hair; perhaps the shaving bowl which is now in the Musée Carnavalet; some very clean linen (six shirts, six collars, six handkerchiefs); three pairs of stockings (one almost new); one pair of well-worn
shoes and a newer pair; a satin waistcoat (probably pink) and a waistcoat of raz de Saint-Maur (a very fine shaven cloth) which was threadbare; three pairs of trousers, one black, one green and one black velvet; a black cloth coat and his lawyer’s gown. There were also clothes brushes, shoe brushes, needles and thread (his mother had taught him to sew
as well as make lace before she died).\textsuperscript{17} Everything fitted easily into the trunk he borrowed from one of his sister’s friends. He may also have needed to borrow money for the journey that cost about 35 \textit{livres}.

Some say the coach waited for him outside the theatre in the Place de la Comédie, since it could not enter his narrow street, and a
small crowd of well-wishers gathered to see him leave. But these were hard times in Arras and there was little optimism in the streets, where there had recently been riots over bread shortages. During the past few months, as the electoral assemblies argued among themselves in their perfumed halls, hungry mobs marauded outside, with no reason to believe that the
changes imminent in France would benefit them personally. It is more likely that Robespierre took his place in the public coach to Paris that changed horses in Arras at the merchant Lefebvre’s, and that his siblings and a few of his small circle of friends waved him off from there. According to one story, he turned to the servant who
carried his bag to the coach for him and boasted that he would one day make him mayor of Arras. In another version Robespierre threw a celebratory dinner for his friends before leaving and said to a servant nicknamed Lantillette: ‘Remember, my dear friend, that everything is going to change in France. Yes! … the Lantillettes of this world will become
mayors and the mayors will be Lantillettes.’ There is more personal spite in this than revolutionary foresight, yet when he left Arras in 1789, Robespierre had reason to expect that he would return to find it dramatically altered.
Representing the Nation at Versailles
WITH A POPULATION of about 55,000, Versailles was nearly three times the size of Arras, and almost one tenth the size of Paris. By eighteenth-century standards, it was a modern European city, with a carefully planned symmetrical grid of streets, avenues and monuments (which was later borrowed as a model for Washington DC). When he visited
Versailles on his travels in 1789, Arthur Young noted that ‘this town is absolutely fed by the palace’. He had heard stories of the grandeur of what had been France’s unofficial capital since the Sun King Louis XIV moved there with his court in 1682. Versailles was only about ten miles south-west of Paris, but it was at a higher altitude and surrounded by attractive
wooded hills, very convenient for royal hunting parties. Young, however, was unimpressed:

The palace of Versailles, one of the objects of which report had given me the greatest expectation, is not in the least striking. I view it without
emotion; the impression it makes is nothing. What can compensate the want of unity? From whatever point viewed, it appears an assemblage of buildings; a splendid quarter of a town, but not a fine edifice ... The great gallery is the finest room I have
seen; the other apartments are nothing; but the pictures and statues are well known to be a capital collection.³

Later Young rambled through the gardens and by the Grand Canal ‘with absolute astonishment at the exaggerations of writers and travellers’ – he found no
beauty anywhere. An earlier visitor was even harsher:

The unpleasant odours in the park, gardens, even the château, make one’s gorge rise. The communicating passages, courtyards, buildings in the wings, corridors, are full of urine and faeces; a pork butcher
actually sticks and roasts his pigs at the bottom of the ministers’ wing every morning; the avenue Saint-Cloud is covered with stagnant water and dead cats.\textsuperscript{4}

The stench must have reached the royal apartments where Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette were living with
their young family. And it can only have got worse with the arrival of well over a thousand delegates to the Estates General, plus friends and spectators, all swelling the population of Versailles and further straining its sanitation.

Like Louis XVI’s coronation in 1775, but even more so, the meeting of the Estates
General was a spectacular re-enactment of the history, tradition and pageantry of France. On Monday 4 May 1789, the deputies of all three Estates first assembled in Versailles’ neo-classical Church of Notre-Dame for the roll-call of the bailliages. There were 302 Clergy, 289 Nobility, and 576 Third Estate: 1,167 deputies in total (this number rose by 35 when
the Third Estate deputies from Paris, delayed by complex elections, arrived a month later). The chancel was covered in ceremonial drapes and there was a throne to the right of the choir screen, awaiting the entrance of the king, who was distracted because his eldest son was ill (and had just weeks to live). Louis XVI finally appeared at ten
o’clock, wearing his coronation robes and heralded by trumpets, fifes and tambours. The Third Estate was expected to kneel in his presence, as it had in 1614, but it refused to do so. He took his seat and the high-ranking officers of the realm took theirs below him on velvet benches embroidered with fleurs-de-lis. The queen and other ladies of the court
sat opposite, to the left of the choir screen, beautifully attired and sparkling with jewels. Two by two, the deputies approached the king, candle in hand, bowing to him, and then to his queen. Outside, the king’s Swiss Guard lined the short route from Notre-Dame to the Church of Saint-Louis, where the Estates would reassemble for Mass. Processing with the
Eucharist, they moved past buildings hung with tapestries, watched by an adoring crowd, sometimes respectfully silent, sometimes applauding and shouting, ‘Long live the king!’ First came the Clergy wearing cassocks and square bonnets, then the Nobility in garments of black silk and gold brocade with magnificent hats plumed à la Henri IV, and finally the
Third Estate – far less resplendent – in black coats and batiste cravats. Preparing for the ceremony, one liberal-minded noble from Saumur, the Marquis de Ferrières, wrote to his wife, ‘My crimson vest will be superb; I still need the trimming for the garment and for the coat. But the hat is expensive. The cheapest one cost 180 livres.’

On the day he was surprised
to find himself spiritually moved far beyond such mundane concerns:

Soon I ceased to see the spectacle that I had before my eyes; thoughts that were more intoxicating and yet at the same time melancholy offered themselves to my spirit. France, my
fatherland [patrie], revealed itself in all its splendour. And I asked myself, what muddled minds, what ambitious, vile men, for their own interests, are trying to break-up this whole, so great, so respectable, and dissipate this glory like insubstantial smoke dispersed on
the wind? Love for my country has made itself very powerfully felt in my heart. I was not previously aware just how far the mutual ties extend which unite us all to this soil, to the men who are our brothers, but I understood it in that instance.
Somewhere in this procession was Robespierre, walking with seven other Third Estate deputies from Arras. They were only just in time, having left Arras late and struggled to find accommodation in crowded Versailles, until they were lucky at the Fox (Hôtellerie du Renard) in the rue Sainte-Elisabeth.

From a window
overlooking the main street of Versailles, Necker’s grown-up daughter, Mme de Staël, was watching the procession. She could see her father, the king’s chief minister, walking stiffly past. She could see the king and queen gloriously attired. But her attention was caught by one of the deputies of the Third Estate – the Comte de Mirabeau, a nobleman who had been
elected to the Third Estate. Mirabeau was hard to miss. When he arrived in Versailles, aged forty, he was accompanied by a varied and outrageous reputation. He had been many things under the Old Regime: a man of letters, a journalist, an infamous son of a respectable father, a rivetingly ugly seducer of women, a pornographer, a prisoner alongside the
Marquis de Sade, and an accomplished orator. Condemning him to death in his absence for seduction and abduction, the Parlement of Besançon had gone so far as to behead a paper effigy of him. Mirabeau had been rejected as a representative of the Nobility, so had appealed to the Third Estate, who elected him in both Aix and Marseille. Looking down on
him. Mme de Staël reflected:

You could not but look at this man, when once you had noticed him: his immense black head of hair distinguished him among them all; you would have said his force depended on it, like that of Samson: his face borrowed new
expression from its very ugliness; his whole person gave you the idea of an irregular power, but a power such as you would figure in a Tribune of the People. 8

Robespierre – whom next to no one had heard of, and who
never stood out in a crowd – went unnoticed.

The following day was the official opening of the Estates General in the Salle des Menus-Plaisirs, a hall specially constructed on the grounds of the Hôtel des Menus-Plaisirs, which housed the administrative office responsible for arranging royal festivities in Versailles. The new hall was spacious
and provided abundant spectator seating (three of the four walls supported public galleries). Under the interested gaze of the excited audience, one old man arrived in his farming clothes, ostentatiously rejecting the austere black costume of the Third Estate. His fellow deputies, already restless amid the noble and clerical pomp and ceremony,
applauded loudly. Necker, still the popular idol on whom the hopes of Paris were resting, read his opening address. It was a very disappointing speech, conservative in idiom and content. One contemporary described it as the issue of ‘a mind intoxicated with vanity, displaying an incapacity or unwillingness to explain or illustrate: a composition,
indecent, unmanly, out of place, betraying a narrow understanding and a timorous heart’. At the end of Necker’s long boring speech, the king ceremoniously raised and replaced his hat. The nobles did the same. So did some of the Third Estate, but then, one after another, they took their hats off again – an impromptu expression of belligerence. Confused by
this unscripted development, the king removed his own hat again. The queen leant over to ask him what he was doing and there was an unscheduled pause in the proceedings during which the nobles started hesitantly uncovering their heads as well.

Subtle signs of intransigence turned rapidly into open defiance. On 6 May the Third Estate refused to
take a roll-call of its deputies or to verify their representative credentials separately from the Clergy and Nobility. The concern was that separate verification would lead to separate voting by order. Instead, the Third Estate demanded a joint assembly with the other two Estates, where votes would be counted by head, and it would stand a chance of outvoting
the Nobility and Clergy. Among the delegates to the Third Estate were many close students of the recent debate over how the Estates General should be organised, which Louis XVI had publicly welcomed a year ago and was now sorely regretting.

The Nobility and Clergy went off to their separate assemblies, in nearby halls built for the purpose, but the
Third Estate remained in the Salle des Menus-Plaisirs. All the Third Estate had to do to maintain the impasse arising from its refusal to verify its representative credentials was nothing, which was just as well considering the chaos in which it found itself. Friends, relations, journalists and other members of the public spilling over from the spectator galleries filled the
seats vacated by nobles and clergymen. From the big central table no one could make a speech without turning his back on half the deputies. Eventually, practically minded Dr Joseph-Ignace Guillotin – a Parisian physician and philanthropist – resolved the problem by rearranging the seats in a semicircle. But even so, it was hard to follow the
disorderly debates echoing around the high vaulted hall, competing with chatter from journalists and members of the public mingling with the delegates.

In these unpromising circumstances, Robespierre – Robes-pierre, Robesse-pierre, Robertz-Pierre, Rabesse-Pierre, Robests-piesse, Robespienne: the journalists found it hard to catch his
name and even harder to spell it – made his first contribution. To one acquaintance he confided that he was as shy as a child, shaking with fear as he approached the table: ‘He told me that he was prey to the most childish timidity, that he never approached the tribune without trembling, and that when he began to speak, his faculties were
entirely absorbed by fear.’ The hall went dark before him and he could see or hear nothing as he raised his voice. But to Buissart, back in Arras, Robespierre wrote in proud, confident tones, explaining how only bad luck had come between his first intervention and lasting glory. He spoke about the Third Estate’s urgent need to decide how to proceed in its impasse.
with the other two orders. One possibility was to nominate and dispatch negotiators to the other assemblies; another was to stay put but invite the Nobility and Clergy to return and reunite with the Third Estate. Robespierre had a third idea, unoriginal but politically powerful: divide and rule. He suggested inviting only the Clergy to
return in the first instance. Afterwards the Nobility would be isolated and under more pressure to join the rest of the nation. Because he outlined this plan at a comparatively late stage in the debate, delayed perhaps by his nerves, or merely by the number of other speakers ahead of him, it was not voted on. Afterwards, Robespierre criticised the voting
procedures, but took comfort in the fact that many delegates came up to him, commenting favourably on his plan and claiming they would have voted for it if only they had been allowed to.

During these early days, as Robespierre developed his fledgling reputation, he was invited to dine with Necker. A few years earlier he had
called Necker ‘... a great man who seems to have been shown to the people merely for them to glimpse the full extent of the happiness they might enjoy, whose elevation was a triumph for genius, virtue and the nation’. Allegedly, this was one of the occasions when Robespierre had to borrow smarter clothes than he owned. Necker’s wife regularly held supper parties
for friends of her husband and admirers of her glamorous daughter Mme de Staël, and took to inviting along some of the deputies newly arrived in Versailles. Mme de Staël would have been an imposing figure for anyone encountering her for the first time – she was married to the Swedish ambassador Baron de Staël-Holstein, accustomed to being at court,
attractive, flirtatious, intellectual and extremely well connected. Robespierre did not make a favourable impression on her. Later she recalled her first meeting with the Incorruptible: ‘His features were mean, his complexion pale, his veins a greenish hue.’ She also noted the radicalism of his views. Considering the differences in
their circumstances, it would have been peculiar if Robespierre had seemed anything other than common and unappealing to Mme de Staël. According to one of her gossipy friends, she ‘surrendered without the slightest struggle to any man who showed himself more aware of the beauty of her embrace than the charms of her mind. Yet you would be
wrong to conclude that I considered her shameless, for she did insist on a certain delicacy of feeling and has shown herself capable of passions that were very deep and devoted while they lasted.’¹³ Provincial, puritanical, inexperienced Robespierre was worlds away from Mme de Staël’s sophisticated way of life, as was immediately obvious
when he sat down at her parents’ table.

For a brief period during his transition from provincial to national politics, Robespierre identified strongly with his fellow delegates from Arras, for whom he had become unofficial spokesman. Boasting to Buissart, he claimed that their group was already distinguished for their
patriotism and their close rapport with the forty-four deputies from Brittany with whom they formed a progressive faction, radical and (according to Robespierre) ready to die for their country. The concept of patriotism had a long history in France and had been used in the preambles to royal edicts since the end of the seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{14}
Involvement in America’s struggle for freedom transformed French notions of patriotism in the 1770s into a secular ideology opposed to despotic government – although the crippling cost of these wars somewhat tarnished the glamour of the idea. By 1789 a new version of patriotism was taking root in the wake of the recent nationwide elections, and
fervent public interest in what the Estates General would achieve – the concept now became a label for Third Estate aspirations.\(^{16}\) Robespierre’s own understanding of patriotism was also influenced by Rousseau’s definition: ‘There can be no patriotism without liberty; no liberty without virtue; no virtue without citizens. Create citizens and
you have everything you need; without them you have nothing but debased slaves, from the rulers of the state downwards.'

If not all the Third Estate deputies were as committed to liberty and virtue as Robespierre, he nevertheless deemed most of them enlightened and well intentioned. There were exceptions, of course. In
particular, he singled out Pierre-Victor Malouet, a deputy from the bailliage of Riom in Auvergne, as ‘the most suspect, the most odious of all the patriots’. Here was a dangerous intriguer, a notorious conservative intent on promoting the aristocratic faction in the midst of the Third Estate. In his letter to Buissart, Robespierre relates an occasion on which
Malouet proposed an insidious motion ‘worthy of his servile soul’ and the other deputies from Auvergne disassociated themselves, protesting that he represented only Riom, not their whole province. Interestingly, Robespierre does not say what the motion was, only that it went down very badly.

He went on to summarise for Buissart his observations
on the workings of the assembly – how and why speeches succeed or fail, the ways in which reputations can be made or lost. He was particularly interested in Guy-Jean-Baptiste Target, the leading Breton deputy, who arrived in Versailles with an established reputation and was prominent in the assembly from the start. Listening closely to his every
word, Robespierre noticed that the points he made were ordinary, nothing but a summary of prevailing opinion delivered with great emphasis and eloquence, yet this was enough to win great applause. With a touch of glee Robespierre described Target as already ‘hors de combat’ despite his promising start. One of Target’s motions had been so ridiculous the
whole assembly immediately rejected it; Robespierre suspected him of having ‘versatile principles’ and doubted his representative credentials. On the most famous man in the Third Estate assembly, the great Comte de Mirabeau, Robespierre’s verdict was startling: ‘Mirabeau is nothing.’ He thought Mirabeau’s dissolute moral
character made it impossible to trust him – or ought to. These opinions about Target and Mirabeau were eccentric. In the short term, Robespierre could not have been more wrong: both men were to play prominent parts in the politics of the Third Estate over the coming weeks. But in the long term he proved to be right: neither was to put their stamp on the Revolution as he
would. Robespierre would certainly have explained this difference in terms of moral character and firmness of principle – the strength of his own and the weakness of theirs – but this too would have been somewhat eccentric.

Around the time of Robespierre’s election, the local newspaper in Arras had run a satirical article
describing the characters of each of the city’s deputies as though they were horses entered in a race. The entry for the horse Robespierre was longer and more detailed than the others: ‘impetuous, intolerant of bit and stick, vicious, only dares to bite from behind, fears the whip. Its inclusion was a surprise but it is said to be destined to provide a comic turn after the
brilliant performances of Mirabeau, Bergasse, Malouet etc. whose actions it has been trained to mimic in a ridiculous fashion.' The article meant to be cruelly amusing and it certainly underestimated Robespierre’s talent for politics, even if the full significance of his election would only become apparent years later. What it very accurately predicted,
though, was his determination to transform himself into a successful politician. He knew he had much to learn from the delegates who arrived in Versailles with political experience and he set about studying diligently the techniques by which they influenced the assembly.

The radical faction of deputies, to which Robespierre was so proud of
belonging, started meeting to agree on objectives and to coordinate strategies. After each meeting of the Third Estate deputies, this faction, known informally as the Breton Club, would repair to the nearby Café Amaury, to discuss the implications of what had happened. Here, over the weeks to come, Robespierre, the deputies from Brittany and other
radicals distanced themselves from the constitutional ideas of the royalists among the deputies to the Third Estate, like Malouet and the Grenoble patriot Jean-Joseph Mounier (another of the small number to come to Versailles with an established reputation). The Breton Club’s objectives were to obtain voting by head and not by order, the destruction of
privileges like the tax exemptions that favoured the Clergy and Nobility and harmed the Third Estate, and the creation of a nationwide network of patriots. During these early days, there were many future enemies drinking coffee together in the Café Amaury, united in their hopes for the Third Estate. As well as making contacts and developing a taste for club
politics, Robespierre was also mixing with a more diverse set than he had encountered before. His fellow deputies from Arras watched as he grew in confidence and became gradually less withdrawn.

Incipient factionalism, provincialism, chaos, confused ideas and political uncertainty were escalating in the Salle des Menus-Plaisirs.
when the deputies from Paris, who had been delayed by an electoral process even more complicated than the rest of France’s, at last reached Versailles on 3 June – a whole month late. Paris was always a case apart. When asked by the king to codify procedures for electing deputies to the Estates General, Necker had produced special guidelines
for the capital. However, the sixty Parisian districts disregarded these guidelines and took the radical step of establishing their own electoral college to choose deputies for the Third Estate. One of the candidates for election was the astronomer Jean Sylvain Bailly, who felt revived and exhilarated by the city’s new political climate: ‘I thought I could
breathe fresh air. It was truly a phenomenon to be something in the political order and by virtue alone of one’s capacity as a citizen.’

Bailly was born in Paris in 1736, so was already over fifty when the Revolution began. A member of the French Academy of Sciences, known for his research into the planet Jupiter, he interrupted his studies to
preside over the new electoral college and was elected as a deputy to Versailles. No sooner had he arrived than he was chosen as President of the assembly of the Third Estate. The late-arriving deputies brought with them new vigour, the expectations of all Paris, and the brilliant analytical mind of the abbé Sieyès, who had chosen to stand for election not as a
clergyman, but as a member of the Third Estate.

Though he lacked a religious vocation, Sieyès had spent ten years in a seminary, consoling himself with scientific and philosophical study. He was finally ordained a priest in 1773, two years before Louis XVI’s coronation. Sieyès had a sharp, intelligent face that reminded some people of
portraits of Erasmus – he was a genius at the theory of politics: the nature and principles of representative government became his lifelong preoccupation. According to one contemporary, he was far from modest: ‘Politics is a science which I think I have mastered,’ Sieyès allegedly confided to a friend.\textsuperscript{22} Early in 1789 he published the
clearest of all the statements of the Third Estate’s predicament, beginning famously with three questions and answers: What has the Third Estate been until now? Nothing. What should it be? Everything. What does it aim to become? Something. With devastating rhetoric and lucid reasoning he argued that the Third Estate simply was the nation. As such it had the
inalienable right to provide France with a new system of fundamental rules and principles through which the country would be governed. From this point, the Third Estate deputies explicitly believed what many had hoped before arriving in Versailles: that they had been elected to endow France with a written constitution which would transform the old
absolute monarchy into a constitutional monarchy. Sieyès insisted that anything or anyone that kept apart from the Third Estate was parasitical, a canker in the body of the people that required excision. In this way he provided the theoretical basis for the Third Estate to seize the initiative from the Clergy and Nobility and remake the nation in its own
image.

Though others shared some of Sieyès’ ideas, no one else expressed them with such coherent vehemence. His was ‘the explosion of a talent, which long concealed, at length appears in all its splendour, arrests attention and extorts applause’, as Mirabeau put it. Yet when Sieyès arrived in the Salle des Menus-Plaisirs
experienced the problems often characteristic of intellectuals in politics – wry, brusque, conceptually elaborate, infuriatingly inaudible, it was hard for him to project the distinctive clarity of his vision into the noisy and diffuse debates going on around him. ‘His voice is thin, his gesture insignificant, his expression slow, his conception difficult,
his method unintelligible; he is incapable of ardent and animated language, and he prefers correctness of form to energy of diction,’ a contemporary remarked. 24 Despite all this, Sieyès had an early, epoch-defining success on 10 June when he persuaded the Third Estate that the time had come to ‘cut the cable’ and assume the whole power and identity of
the nation. Delegates of the Nobility and Clergy were to have one last chance to join the Third Estate – and if they refused, the new National Assembly would simply leave them behind.

Robespierre had played a part in moving the assembly toward Sieyès’ position. Three days after the exhilarating arrival of the Paris delegates, no longer
feeling like a nervous child, he had burst into a passionate denunciation of the clergy. The Archbishop of Nîmes had come to the Salle des Menus-Plaisirs to plead with the Third Estate to break its deadlock with the other two orders for the sake of the poor and destitute who were suffering from hunger while the Estates General remained in deadlock achieving
nothing. The archbishop stood before the Third Estate hoping to shame them into cooperation, well fed, richly attired and condescending. Robespierre lost his temper. He had seen how the wealthy clergy in Arras lived. He owed the Abbot of Saint-Vaast his scholarship to Louis-le-Grand. As a schoolboy he had had to borrow clothes good enough
to appear before the archbishop in Arras. Much of his early legal practice had come through the ecclesiastical court. He knew and was indebted to the worldly power of the Church in France. ‘Sell your coaches, give up your horses,’ he demanded, reminding the assembly of the early Church’s austerity and the principles of Christian
humility.

Go and tell your colleagues that if they are so impatient to assist the suffering poor, they had better come hither and join the friends of the people. Tell them no longer to embarrass our proceedings with affected delays: tell
them no longer to endeavour by unworthy means to make us swerve from the resolutions we have taken; but as ministers of religion – as worthy imitators of their masters – let them forego that luxury which surrounds them, and that splendour which
makes indigence blush — let them resume the modesty of their origin — discharge the proud lackeys by whom they are attended — sell their superb equipages, and convert all their superfluous wealth into food for the poor. 25
The Assembly was stunned. There was no applause, but a confused murmur, which was much more flattering. The question passing along the benches and round the echoing hall was, ‘Who is that?’ Sitting up and taking notice, some of Robespierre’s fellow deputies began to predict a prominent career for him: ‘This young man has not yet practised, he
is too wordy, and does not know when to stop; but he has a store of eloquence and bitterness which will not leave him in the crowd.’

Following the advice of the abbé Sieyès, the Third Estate issued its final invitation to the other two orders, received no response, and proceeded to the long-postponed roll-call of its deputies, which was the
formal beginning of its work. There was tremendous excitement on 13 June when three parish priests from Poitou defected from the Clergy and joined the Third Estate. Sixteen more clergy followed suit over the next few days. On 17 June, after a week of verifying the credentials of its deputies, the Third Estate changed its name and declared itself the
National Assembly. There was no turning back now – no more possible negotiation or rapprochement with the other two orders – the Revolution had arrived. Louis XVI was no longer absolute sovereign of France answerable only to God in the exercise of his power. Instead, he confronted a National Assembly asserting the principle of popular sovereignty. More
than this, Target (still a leading radical despite Robespierre’s low opinion) proposed that all existing taxes be declared illegal and only sanctioned provisionally until a completely new system could be instituted. This meant that if the National Assembly was dissolved prematurely, taxation would come to an end. The Revolution was
holding the king to ransom. Louis XVI consulted Necker, and Necker advised conciliation, unlike the queen, who thought the time for firmness long overdue and was secretly encouraging the convergence of the king’s army on Paris. Necker suggested a Royal Session – a public consultation between the king and the deputies of all three orders – at which
Louis XVI would reassert his authority, sweetened by lots of concessions to the Third Estate. He drafted some speeches to this effect for Louis XVI, but Marie Antoinette modified them behind his back.

Early on Saturday 20 June, deputies arrived at the Salle des Menus-Plaisirs expecting to welcome the rest of the Clergy, who had finally
voted as a body to join the Third Estate. They found themselves locked out. Soldiers guarded the bolted doors to their hall and posters everywhere announced a forthcoming Royal Session of which no one had previously heard. Dr Guillotin, practical as ever, suggested that the angry crowd of deputies reassemble in a nearby indoor tennis court belonging to a
friend of his. They did so, then swore a passionate oath never to disband until ‘the constitution of the Realm and public regeneration are established and assured’, however long, however difficult that might be. The revolutionary painter Jacques-Louis David commemorated the scene on an unfinished canvas. David was the same age as the abbé
Sieyès, born in 1748. He had already caused a sensation in the Paris salon with his depiction of classical republican virtue and patriotism, *The Oath of the Horatii* (1785) and his *Death of Socrates* (1787). He pictured the impassioned deputies in the tennis court, crowding around their president Jean Sylvain Bailly, raising their right arms,
holding their hats high, standing on chairs to swear the revolutionary oath as a welcome summer breeze swept through their impromptu meeting place. Among those prominent in the foreground are an enormous Mirabeau, a refined-looking abbé Sieyès, and Robespierre along with them, clasping both hands to his breast, pledging twice
over a heart beating passionately for liberty.

Louis XVI’s Royal Session went ahead on 23 June, a day later than the posters had promised. Necker was absent. Aware of the king’s intentions, he had advised strongly against any attempt to dissolve the National Assembly, and was, once again, ignored. All the political and fiscal
concessions that the court and government could think of were overshadowed by the king’s uncompromising declaration that the divisions between his realm’s three orders must remain. At the end of his speech, he ordered the deputies to return to their separate assemblies. The Clergy and Nobility obeyed, some of them smirking with pleasure at what looked like
the demise of the National Assembly. But Mirabeau leapt to his feet and declared: ‘We are here by the power of the people, and we will not leave except by the force of bayonets.’

This signalled a rapturous renewal of the Tennis Court Oath. Meanwhile, the king was informed of Necker’s resignation. The Third Estate’s truculence seemed
temporarily less important, and for the rest of the day Louis XVI’s priority was to get Necker to withdraw his resignation. He did, but it was too late: Paris had exploded in disgust. Necker, whose portrait had been paraded by a jubilant crowd after the fall of Lamoignon in 1788, once again inspired the people, but this time they wanted and demanded the National
Assembly, which he viewed only as an inconvenient compromise in the circumstances. Fireworks lit the sky over Versailles and Paris after a tearful Louis XVI finally gave in and ordered the Nobility and Clergy to join the Third Estate on 27 June. Given Mirabeau’s prominent role, it is not surprising that Robespierre, in his next letter
to Buissart (dated 23 July), entirely revised his opinion – he no longer saw Mirabeau as dissolute and negligible, but as the charismatic unofficial leader of the National Assembly. ‘The present Revolution’, his letter began, ‘has produced greater events in a few days than the whole previous history of mankind.’

*
Despite the king’s climbdown, the royal troops now assembling in and around Paris – which included some regiments of foreign soldiers more likely to fire on French civilians if necessary – were making the newly triumphant deputies very nervous. By early July there were more than enough to quell an uprising in the capital. Mirabeau drew up a
petition of protest and Robespierre was one of the deputies who presented it in person to the king. The petition, he assured Buissart, was ‘sublime, full of majesty, truth and energy’. It had no effect whatever. The ominous military build-up continued, and on 11 July, despite his popularity and public standing in recent weeks, Necker was dismissed and
sent into exile because many in Louis XVI’s court blamed him for the Revolution. At this Paris, predictably, rioted. Robespierre’s friend from school, Camille Desmoulins – at twenty-six an attractively boyish man always known by his first name – addressed the crowd in the Palais-Royal gardens, where the Café de Foy had become a centre of political discussion to rival
the National Assembly. ‘Citizens,’ cried Camille, ‘you know that the Nation had asked for Necker to be retained, and he has been driven out! Could you be more insolently flouted? After such an act they will dare anything.’ Standing on a table, cheered, applauded, Camille raged against the monarchy, comparing himself to Otyrhades, a warrior of the
ancient world who wrote, ‘Sparta has triumphed’ in his own blood on a captured standard: ‘I too would write in my own blood “France is free!”’

Later, in his letter to Buissart, Robespierre described the mounting fear in the National Assembly as it went into permanent session for three days and nights, ready to respond immediately.
to events as they unfolded. He told of a patriotic army of 300,000 rising, as if by magic, from the streets of Paris, including every class of citizen, French and Swiss Guards and other soldiers going over to the people’s side. He marvelled at the speed with which, on 14 July, this people’s army took the Bastille, the chief fortress in the ‘tax-farmers’ customs
wall around Paris – a symbol of oppression before the Revolution, an iconoclastic triumph ever since its fall. Under the Old Regime most of the Bastille’s prisoners had been snatched from freedom by *lettres de cachet* and detained indefinitely inside the imposing fortress with its eight round towers and walls five foot thick. There had also been a recent vogue for anti-
Bastille literature – lurid accounts of life inside by expressors – that had further secured it as a place of horror in popular imagination. However, by 14 July 1789 there were very few prisoners left inside: a mere seven. The most famous of all the Bastille’s prisoners, the Marquis de Sade, had been transferred elsewhere on 5 July after adapting his slop
and urine funnel into a megaphone for haranguing passers-by with sensational revolutionary bulletins: massacre was imminent inside the prison; its governor, de Launay, was butchering the inmates; the people must storm the walls before it was too late. But despite such colourful incitements, the infamous fortress had to wait its turn
while first the people attacked the tollgates, the city wall that impeded free trade, the Abbey of Saint-Lazare where firearms were stockpiled, and the Invalides for its cannon and other weapons.

The siege of the Bastille did not begin until early in the morning of 14 July and it was all over by early evening. It involved only about 900 citizens, many of them
tradesmen – joiners, carpenters, cobblers and so forth – from the Saint-Antoine district of Paris that lay outside the city wall. Ranged against these patriots were apprehensive prison officers, regular prison guards, and some reinforcements from the Swiss Salis-Samade regiment that had arrived on 7 July. Lieutenant Deflue was in
charge of these reinforcements and for a whole week he observed Governor de Launay’s preparations for defending the Bastille with surprise and dismay:

I could see clearly, from his perpetual uneasiness and irresolution, that if we were attacked we
should be very badly led. He was so terrified that at night he mistook the shadows of trees and other objects around him for enemies, and on this account we had to be on the alert all night. The staff officers, the lieutenant du roi, the regimental adjutant and I myself
often argued with him, on the one hand to reassure him about the weakness of the garrison, of which he complained constantly, and on the other to induce him not to bother about insignificant details while neglecting important matters. He would listen to us, and
seem to agree with our advice; then he would do just the reverse, then a minute later he would change his mind; in a word, his whole behaviour gave proof of the utmost irresolution.  

On the day of the attack, the two sides at first negotiated for control of the
fortress. Fighting broke out in the afternoon, but the morale of those inside was low. Their leader was hopelessly indecisive, they had neither the food nor the water supply to survive a real siege, the moat between them and their attackers was dry, and anyway many of the guards really sympathised with the assailants. Soon after five o’clock they had taken the
The people promptly punished Governor de Launay for having fired the Bastille cannon at ‘those deputed by the inhabitants of Paris to seize the firearms and gunpowder that menaced them’. They also punished the city’s chief magistrate, de Flesselles, *prévôt des marchands*, who was widely suspected of conspiring with
the court against the people and attempting to hide the city’s ammunition stores. Governor de Launay died in the street from multiple stab and shot wounds, and de Flesselles was murdered on the steps of the Hôtel de Ville. The ‘livid and bloody’ severed heads of both men were carried through Paris on pikes for twenty-four hours and only thrown into the river
Seine on 15 July. In his account, Robespierre seems entirely comfortable describing their fate as the people’s unmediated justice. He comments enthusiastically that ‘the terror inspired by this national army, ready to present itself in Versailles, determined the Revolution’. His sanctioning of mob violence is made explicit in the postscript of his letter to
Buissart: ‘M. Foulon was hanged yesterday by the people’s decree.’ Joseph François Foulon was one of the ministers chosen by Louis XVI to replace Necker. Allegedly he had claimed that ‘the country would be best governed where the common people should be compelled to feed upon grass’ and had boasted that when he was minister ‘he would make the
people of France live upon hay’. He was lynched by the Parisian mob, then his head was severed and paraded, the mouth stuffed with grass because people blamed him for the famine now sweeping the country, even though it had been predicted long before he came to power.

Robespierre’s calm assessment of these deaths at the hands of the mob was not
unusual among the deputies in the National Assembly, still in Versailles days after the revolutionary initiative had moved to Paris. Barnave, a deputy from Grenoble and a future enemy of Robespierre’s, quipped: ‘What, then, is their blood so pure?’ Against this, Robespierre’s understanding of revolutionary violence, justice and terror looks
sophisticated. In his account, Governor de Launay, de Flesselles, Foulon and others were lynched by the will of the people; the status of their blood, whatever Barnave meant by this, was irrelevant. From now on the will of the people was to be everything.

When the National Assembly learnt of the day’s events on
the evening of 14 July, they expected Louis XVI to recall Necker. This he failed to do, despite expressing regret for the bloodshed in Paris, and beginning to withdraw his troops from the city centre. The next morning Mirabeau had just finished a brilliant speech on the threat of foreign invasion when Louis XVI himself arrived at the Salle des Menus-Plaisirs,
unexpectedly on foot, accompanied only by his two brothers the Comtes de Provence and Artois. There was still no mention of recalling Necker, though the removal of troops from Paris was enough cause for celebration. Robespierre tells of the king returning to his palace amid ‘demonstrations of enthusiasm and intoxication’ that are
Then, on the evening of 16 July, the Comte d’Artois and other members of the court suddenly fled the country. The following day Louis XVI and his family visited Paris: the Parisians wanted him back in their city. The king was not yet a prisoner, but he was in a plain coach drawn by six black horses, at the mercy of the National Assembly, and
flanked by a hundred of its delegates, walking solemnly with a slightly funereal air. One of the hundred was Robespierre, who later evoked this journey to the Hôtel de Ville for Buissart. ‘It is’, he wrote, ‘impossible to imagine a spectacle so august and so profound, and even more impossible to convey the impressions it made on a responsive spirit.’

39 Imagine
for yourself’, he continued, ‘a king, whose name only yesterday made the entire capital and nation tremble, who hears for the first time cries of “Long live the Nation! Long live Liberty”.’ As he processed to Paris, Louis XVI could see his own soldiers amid the newly formed citizen militia lining the route. Just weeks ago the crowd’s cry was ‘Long live
the king’ as he arrived to open the Estates General. Now the nation with its claim to liberty had displaced him.

Paris was jubilant with joyous citizens, hanging from buildings and trees, women leaning out of high windows, all welcoming, applauding and delighting in the procession. Robespierre called it a national festival. His responses were deeply
emotional – his heart and imagination engaged. He noticed with particular pleasure some monks who had pinned on their cassocks the new patriotic cockade – a red and blue rosette, the twin colours of Paris. (In the Café du Foy, the incendiary Camille Desmoulins attached a different significance to these colours: red for the blood shed for freedom and
blue for the celestial constitution that would enshrine it.) Passing churches on the way, Robespierre saw robed and surpliced clergy competing with the crowd in their displays of patriotic gratitude. There were even cockades attached to stoles, and this, he promised Buissart, was fact not fiction. Why was he so thrilled by these signs that the clergy
endorsed the Revolution? Perhaps because he had not expected it and was pleasantly surprised; or simply because what the clergy thought or felt still mattered a great deal to him.

Robespierre already knew the astronomer Bailly as the president of the National Assembly, but now he watched him take on a new role as the recently elected
mayor of revolutionary Paris, welcoming Louis XVI. Bailly had been elected by the capital’s electoral college, originally established to choose deputies to the Third Estate, but now in permanent session in the Hôtel de Ville and the de facto municipal government. In his memoirs Bailly wrote:

I rose very early,
intending to leave for Paris at seven o’clock, and before that to prepare what I was to say to the King on receiving him at the gates of Paris. I was sorry to leave Versailles; I had been happy there in an Assembly whose temper was excellent, and which was worthy
of the great functions that it was called upon to fulfil. I had seen great things done, and had had some share in them. I was leaving all these memories behind: that day, my happiness was over. I have known splendid days since then and moments of satisfaction, but I have
not been happy.

I had sent for a carriage. I was kept waiting to leave; I could not conceive why. When I went out, I was met by all the court coachmen, who offered me a tree loaded with flowers and ribbons ... I had to allow them to fasten this tree to the
front of my coach; all the coachmen accompanied me, letting off fireworks although it was broad daylight … Finally I left them at the end of the avenue, much touched by their friendly pageantry, and much relieved to be able to go on my way freely after being
somewhat delayed. I incurred much praise in the newspapers for the simplicity with which, though chief official of the capital, I arrived in Paris in one of those carriages vulgarly known as ‘chamber-pots’.  

Bailly met the king at the city gates and presented him
with the historic keys to Paris. Then the procession moved on to the Hôtel de Ville. There on the steps recently stained with the blood of de Flesselles, Bailly welcomed the king again, together with General Lafayette, veteran of the American Revolutionary wars and commander of the new people’s army, now named the National Guard. Lafayette
was tall and thin. He had a long nose and reddish hair. His background was aristocratic, but at nineteen he had abandoned his comfortable life in France to fight for freedom in America. Here he impressed George Washington, who remarked: ‘I do most devoutly wish that we had not a single foreigner among us, except the Marquis de Lafayette.’\textsuperscript{41} Back in
France and a popular hero, Lafayette was poised to apply his experience of revolution on home soil. He adapted the red and blue cockade for the uniforms of his National Guards by adding white, the colour of the Bourbon monarchy. Outside the Hôtel de Ville, Bailly presented Louis XVI with one of these cockades: ‘I did not know quite how the King would
take this, and whether there was not something improper about such a suggestion; however, I felt that I was bound to present the cockade, and that the king was bound to accept it.’

This he did, and gamely pinned it on his hat, despite the arch disapproval of his queen who said: ‘I did not think I had married a commoner.’ Robespierre records scenes of
great joy and tenderness, shouts of ‘Long live the king and the nation!’ but nothing could disguise the fact that the terms on which Louis XVI held power had changed dramatically in a matter of weeks. He returned afterwards to his court in Versailles, but his visit to Paris was testament to the capital’s ascendancy over the Revolution.
One of the first things the deputies did after arriving in Paris was to go on a guided tour of the Bastille. Mirabeau led them, mindful of his own days of internment for immorality inside the prison of Vincennes, when ‘the voice of his despair reverberated from dead stone walls’.

As the crowd in the rue Saint-Antoine parted to let the triumphal procession
through, people threw flowers and poems in its path. Books and manuscripts that had been found in the Bastille were piled into Mirabeau’s carriage. Inside, he asked to see the dungeons. His servant, prevented from accompanying him, sobbed hysterically at the entrance to the dungeon, fearing an attack on the leader of the commons in that dank and sombre
place. But Mirabeau went on boldly, moving slowly through the underground cells, knocking on the walls to check for secret underground passages from which enemies of the Revolution might suddenly burst forth. Then he came blinking into the light, climbed one of the towers, lifted a pickaxe and brought it down on the battlements.
Robespierre remarked on how delightful the Bastille seemed now in the hands of the people and under demolition: ‘I could not tear myself away from the place; the sight of it produced such feelings of pleasure and ideas of liberty in all good citizens.’

As Robespierre stood rooted to the spot, his gaze fixed on abstract ideas, the triumph of liberty and the
demise of oppression, others around him saw commercial opportunities in the Bastille’s rubble. The stonemason Pierre-François Palloy had been among the nine hundred who originally stormed the fortress, fighting alongside carpenters and other tradesmen, many from the faubourg Saint-Antoine, where there had been violent riots over bread earlier in the
year. After the fall of the Bastille, Palloy and four more construction specialists were put in charge of demolition. Very soon the ground was strewn with debris that would be recycled as Bastille memorabilia; inkwells, paperweights, commemorative daggers and decorative models of the prison carved from its own stone were to prove popular
and lucrative over the coming years. Spectators came to gawp at chains and manacles, to touch instruments of torture and lock themselves in dank cells where their fellow citizens, plagued by rats, had rotted to death. Robespierre was above all that. He was not much interested in money, nor, as far as we can tell, in sex. He was not commercially minded, not a
connoisseur of thrills. He did not, like Mirabeau, have personal memories of imprisonment to lay to rest, or fears – no matter how outlandish – about the threat the Bastille might still pose. To him the captured fortress was simply a vast monolith on to which his ideas could be projected. Just as when he first stood up to speak in Versailles, the assembly went
blank before him, so standing at the Bastille he saw only what was already in his mind. The picks and shovels fell silent, the workers’ banter, the gawping crowd disappeared. The glorious figure of liberty appeared to him on the crumbling ramparts, and Robespierre stood there hypnotised.
All spring and early summer hope helped fill empty stomachs as people throughout France waited on news from Versailles. But after the Bastille fell there was precious little calm left. Angry mobs marauded through the towns and countryside looking for food or work, only precariously restrained by detachments of the newly formed citizen
militia, or National Guard.46 This volunteer force of amateur soldiers that started in Paris after the fall of the Bastille was now being imitated throughout France. The purpose of the National Guard was to contain spontaneous mob violence of the kind that had killed de Flesselles and de Launay – it was, from the beginning, a pro-revolutionary but peace-
keeping association of civic-minded people – and for this reason membership was generally restricted to tax-paying citizens who were eligible to vote. Lafayette reduced the number of Parisian National Guards to 24,000 and stipulated that they must buy their own uniforms (which necessarily excluded the poor from joining). He also integrated
into the Guard 6,000 professional soldiers. But outside Paris he had less control. Following the Parisian example, the citizens in Versailles and other cities organised their own National Guard. ‘We hope all France will adopt this essential institution,’ comments Robespierre in a letter to Buissart, before urging him to promote it in Arras.
Since the new battalions of National Guards, springing up all over France in a piecemeal, spontaneous and chaotic fashion, had suddenly become the main instrument of law and order in a nation succumbing to revolution, Lally-Tollendal (a conservatively minded member of the National Assembly) suggested excluding from it anyone
likely to be reckless, anyone with nothing to lose, anyone too poor to have an interest in avoiding anarchy. Robespierre at once objected. ‘It is necessary to love order, but not to harm liberty,’ he began. Insurrection, he argued, had saved Paris and the nation from despotism. To his mind it was wrong – or perhaps just too early – to condemn insurrection or
distinguish it sharply from patriotism. There had been deaths, he admitted, a few heads had been lost, but they were guilty heads, so no reason to reproach the insurgent mob. Whatever he had understood liberty to be in the past – an idea, a legal concept, a beleaguered individual right more often breached than observed – it was now linked inextricably
with the Revolution. He saw that insurgency was useful to the Revolution, so defended it in the name of liberty.

The right to privacy, on the other hand, was not particularly useful to the Revolution – might indeed be downright dangerous where its enemies were concerned. And Robespierre had no qualms about overriding the right to privacy when Bailly
forwarded from Paris to the National Assembly a packet of sealed letters addressed to the Comte d’Artois, who had recently fled abroad. These letters had been dramatically snatched from the French Ambassador to Geneva in the middle of the night and probably contained details of a counter-revolutionary plot. The scrupulous National Assembly stood about
discussing whether it was or was not permissible to open them. Robespierre was incredulous; to him it was obvious that the Revolution must come first – in circumstances where national liberty was at stake, crime itself could ‘become an action worthy of praise’. Similarly, he agreed with other radicals in the Assembly, just days after the crowd had murdered
Foulon outside the Hôtel de Ville on the Place de Grève, that extraordinary courts to try crimes against the state were now needed; what was wrong in a time of peace and stability might be justified during a revolution. Robespierre grasped early, rapidly, intuitively the contrast between ends and means that was destined to blight the Revolution, cause
tens of thousands of deaths and haunt the consciences of the survivors. His response was passionate and political. He was vehemently committed to the Revolution and anything it entailed. In short, he behaved like someone with nothing whatever to lose outside the Revolution itself – the kind of person more conservative members of the Assembly
thought unsuited to the citizen militia, let alone positions of power.

As unrest spread through France and pillaging increased in the provinces, the Assembly launched into lengthy theoretical discussions about the new constitution which would not have been out of place in the Sorbonne. At the top of the agenda was the Declaration
of the Rights of Man and Citizen, which was to head the constitution and serve as both the death certificate of the Old Regime and the birth certificate of the new. ‘I well remember the long debate on the subject, which lasted many weeks, as a period of mortal ennui,’ wrote one witness. ‘There were silly disputes about words, much metaphysical jumbling, and
dreadfully tedious prosing.’

Even before 1789, many in France had watched the revolution in America with intense interest, and the deputies were well aware of the bills of rights preceding many of the constitutions adopted by the American states between 1776 and 1783, as possible models for the French. Thomas Jefferson was in Paris and a
good friend of General Lafayette; Benjamin Franklin was still alive and corresponding with his many friends in France; opportunities for personal and intellectual exchanges between the two countries were increasing all the time. But when, after long discussion, the National Assembly settled on a draft for the French Declaration of
Rights, it differed considerably from the American – it was more condensed, more abstract and more suited to France’s peculiar circumstances. It morally condemned the Old Regime and its vestiges of feudalism, and laid the ethical foundations for France’s new constitution. ‘Men are born and remain free and equal in rights,’ it asserted,
repudiating legal and hereditary differences of rank or order. In the vision of the future embodied in the declaration, social distinctions could only be justified if they were useful; France must become a meritocracy; sovereignty belonged to the nation; and the law would express the general will. There was also a hint of an international
crusading mission, since the declaration proclaimed the universal rights of all men, not just Frenchmen. However, by the time Mirabeau presented the projected declaration to the Assembly, he had become sceptical about it: ‘I can safely predict’, he said, ‘that any Declaration of Rights ahead of the constitution will prove but the almanac of a
single year!’ 52

On 4 August, in the absence of both Mirabeau and the abbé Sieyès, the Assembly abruptly decided to intervene to halt the widespread discontent that had been growing during the weeks since the fall of the Bastille. Hoping to reassure the people that, contrary to appearances, they really were going to benefit from the
Revolution, the Assembly decided to abolish formally the remaining traces of feudalism in France. As they went into extraordinary session, a spirit of abandon took over. All day and all night, deputies weeping tears of joy renounced the offending features of the Old Regime, demolishing it piece by piece, like the Bastille. When he heard about it,
Mirabeau reflected, ‘The assembly resembled a dying man who had made his will in a hurry; or, to speak more plainly, each member gave away what did not belong to him, and prided himself upon his generosity at the expense of others.’

The payment of church tithes was stopped; seigniorial relations between landlords and tenants ended; manorial forms of income
and property were no more; differences in the taxes and legal penalties applied to nobles and commoners disappeared; the special exemptions and liberties of particular provinces were abolished; hunting rights and game laws favourable to landlords were dissolved. There was to be no more confusion between public authority and private position,
no more purchasing of public offices; the trade guilds would be radically reformed and the parlements abolished. Rarely has so much legislative work been accomplished in such a short space of time. Yet, in the sober light of morning, Mirabeau and Sieyès were dismayed. ‘This is just the character of our Frenchmen, they are three months
disputing about syllables, and in a single night they overturn the whole venerable edifice of the monarchy,’ complained Mirabeau. For his part, Sieyès was most annoyed by the abrupt abolition of church tithes, which, as he saw it, would simply further enrich private landowners at the expense of the Church. The two disgruntled men went for a walk together, complaining
that the Assembly had failed to act in accordance with their wishes or advice. ‘My dear Abbé,’ said Mirabeau to Sieyès, ‘you have let loose the bull and you now complain that he gores you!’

It took weeks for the Assembly to work out the finer details of all its destructive decrees. Robespierre did not play a prominent part in these
debates. He intervened to insist that executive officers should be held accountable if they abused the power entrusted to them.⁵⁶ He championed freedom of conscience when members of the clergy tried to limit provisions for religious freedom in the new Declaration of Rights.⁵⁷ And, inspired by American examples, he argued for
unlimited freedom of the press. He envisaged government through legislative and executive powers, carefully separated from one another, both strictly responsible to the sovereign people, and both financed through equitably distributed taxes. In the moderate newspaper the *Courier français*, he was commended as someone who
often made very positive contributions to these discussions, without getting worked up or overheated.\textsuperscript{59} Clear, precise and calm as he was, however, there was little to distinguish him from other radicals in the National Assembly, patiently fighting their more conservative colleagues over the Declaration of Rights and the new constitution, line by line,
On 4 October, Paris awoke to find no bread in its bakeries. To add insult to injury, the newspapers were full of inflammatory reports of revelry at Versailles the night before. The papers claimed that there had been a raucous and unpatriotic banquet for
the Flanders regiment which had recently arrived in Versailles to reinforce the royal bodyguard. Allegedly, the national cockade had been trampled beneath the aristocracy’s well-shod and contemptuous feet. One witness, Mme de la Tour du Pin, remembered the event very differently. She noticed Marie Antoinette’s nervous anxiety when a Swiss officer
asked permission to carry the five-year-old Dauphin, like a trophy, around the crowded hall. The ashen-faced queen was visibly relieved when her child was returned to her arms – she was still mourning the death of his elder brother and was understandably fearful in such uncertain times. Nevertheless, on the morning of 4 October, hungry and outraged, Paris rioted. A
baker was murdered by the mob and General Lafayette and his cockade-wearing National Guard struggled to keep order. The next day a mob of about seven thousand women set off from the Hôtel de Ville for Versailles through driving rain, led by a man named Stanislas Maillard, who bore the unofficial title ‘Captain of the Bastille Volunteers’. They
reached their destination in the evening and it was Robespierre who received them: 5 October was crucial to his revolutionary career.

A delegation of twelve of the women plus Maillard, all drenched and mud-splattered from their long walk, entered the National Assembly, demanded food for Paris and insisted that the king’s bodyguard be forced to adopt
the patriotic tricolour cockade. The rest of the mob waited hungry and restless outside. Robespierre, standing neat and composed at the tribune, answered the delegation by ordering an inquiry into the food shortages that menaced Paris. He supported Maillard’s complaint against one particular miller who played the market by refusing for
weeks to grind his flour, despite having been paid 200 *livres* for it. In this way, he made common cause with the poor, echoing their customary fear that there was a plot against them – that their hunger and suffering were no accident, but instead the result of a deliberate and despicable conspiracy. The prospect of an inquiry did nothing to calm the expectant
mob, though it did deflect their anger from the National Assembly. The ensuing night was uncomfortable and full of fear; Versailles was already crammed with people and there was nowhere for the women to sleep. Some bedded down on benches in the National Assembly; pistol shots rang out in the darkness. Inside the palace the court was in panic,
barricaded behind doors that there had been no reason to close for decades. Some of the Parisian women found, or were shown, a small door opening on to a secret staircase into the palace, and as they emerged into the royal precincts surprised bodyguards fired on them. More enraged and frightened than ever, the destitute women then ram-paged
through the palace, eating any food they could lay their hands on. Eventually, after midnight, General Lafayette and 20,000 National Guardsmen arrived in Versailles, soaking wet from the continuing rain.

General Lafayette said to the king, ‘Sire, I thought it better to come here and die at the feet of your Majesty than to die uselessly on the Place
de Grève’ – which was histrionic, but honourable.\footnote{62} Then he explained that the people were demanding bread and the National Guard wanted to replace the royal bodyguards. The king, who had been hesitating all night over the best course of action to take, frantically eliciting opinions from everyone he could find to ask, and repeating all the while, ‘I do
not want to compromise anyone’, gave in immediately on the replacement of his bodyguard. The next day, after a mob had nearly broken into the queen’s apartments, the royal family agreed to return to Paris for good. They found themselves accompanied by an unruly procession of some 60,000 people, many chanting triumphantly that they were
bringing the baker, the baker’s wife and their boy back to the capital. As a gesture of goodwill, the king had ordered sacks of flour to be transported from Versailles to Paris. Yet on the journey he heard himself derided as a baker and could see, outside the carriage windows, the severed heads of murdered palace guards ghoulishly bobbing alongside
on pikes.

‘Men had captured the Bastille,’ wrote the historian Jules Michelet, ‘but it was women who captured the king.’ Entering Paris, the royal family were prisoners in all but name. On the morning of 7 October, they tried to settle into their new accommodation – the dusty Tuileries palace on the right bank of the Seine that had
been disused since the Sun King Louis XIV abandoned Paris for Versailles – while Jean Paul Marat’s daily paper, *L’Ami du Peuple* (*The People’s Friend*), gleefully celebrated their arrival:

The King, Queen, the Dauphin etc. arrived in the capital at about seven o’clock last night. It is indeed a
festival for the good Parisians to possess their King. His presence will promptly change the face of things: the poor people will no longer die of hunger; but this benefit will soon vanish like a dream if we do not fix the Royal family in our midst until the
complete consecration of the Constitution. The ‘People’s Friend’ shares in the joy of his dear fellow-citizens, but he will not give himself over to sleep.  

Marat, a physician and scientist admired by Benjamin Franklin, had begun writing revolutionary
pamphlets in 1788. His *Offrande à la patrie* (*Offering to the Fatherland*) had some points in common with the abbé Sieyès' more famous *Qu’est-ce que le Tiers État?* (*What is the Third Estate?*), arguing for the rights of the nation. Marat, like Sieyès, had a deep knowledge of eighteenth-century political thought, but he soon switched to more direct ways of
communicating with the public. He stood on street corners reading aloud from Rousseau’s *Social Contract*, and he issued his daily paper under the motto ‘Truth or Death’. He preached insurrection to all who listened and helped instigate the women’s march to Versailles. Indeed, he went with them on 5 October, but had to rush straight back to
Paris to keep up his running commentary on revolutionary events. ‘Marat flies to Versailles and returns like lightning, making as much noise as the four trumpets of the last judgement summoning the dead to rise,’ commented Camille Desmoulins, in his own newspaper, Révolutions de France et de Brabant (Revolutions of France and
For his pains, Marat was arrested by the Parisian police on 8 October and imprisoned for about a month. Afterwards he resumed his provocative journalism, giving voice to ‘the wrath of the people’ and evading arrest by hiding in the cellars and sewers of Paris, where he caught a disfiguring skin disease. The ‘People’s Friend’, racked by
migraines, his head wrapped in a vinegar-soaked handkerchief, his body covered with open sores, worked relentlessly to ensure that the ordinary people of Paris played their part in the Revolution. If Marat wanted to keep the king in the Tuileries palace until the new constitution came into effect, he seemed to believe he could bring this about by shouting,
as loudly as possible, day in, day out, into the ears of the Parisian mob.

The National Assembly did not immediately follow the king to Paris; it stayed behind to debate the new constitution, and only closed its sessions at Versailles on 15 October. Buoyant with success, Robespierre was
very active in these debates. By now he had made a name for himself – one that most journalists recognised and could even spell. He insisted, against Mirabeau, that the king’s list of state-funded employees should be subject to annual approval, not permanently granted by the treasury. He argued vehemently that all those still imprisoned by the Old
Regime’s notorious *lettres de cachet* should be unconditionally released. The case of the ex-soldier Dupond, whom he once defended in Arras, may have been in his mind, but this stance also fitted his growing reputation for radicalism, his passion for the application of clear, uncompromising principles, and the sublime emotions he had found
stirring in his heart as he stood amid the rubble of the Bastille.

With characteristic seriousness, Robespierre entered into discussions about the form in which the National Assembly’s decisions should be published. It was not appropriate for these to read like old-style royal proclamations, especially
since the *parlements*, once responsible for registering the king’s edicts, had now been abolished. He suggested an alternative formulation that was somewhat ponderous and prolix: ‘Louis, by the Grace of God, and by the Will of the Nation, King of the French: to all citizens of the French Empire: People, here is the law which your representatives have made,
and to which I have affixed the royal seal.’⁶⁸ According to the newspaper reports, Robespierre read this out to the boisterous and disorderly Assembly in such a pious and earnest tone of voice that someone called out, ‘Gentlemen, this formula is of no use; we want no psalm-singing here!’ and he was laughed off the podium. He was sensitive and extremely
easy to wound or offend, and still rather gauche: a self-respecting, painfully self-conscious provincial with a heavy Artois accent who had thrown himself into the Revolution as he might, in different circumstances, have thrown himself into an important love affair: reckless, unreserved, completely devoid of ironic distance from the events on
which he was staking his life. To be laughed at in such circumstances can only have stung him deeply.

After closing its sessions at Versailles, the National Assembly reconvened in the Archbishop’s Palace in Paris on 19 October. Located on the Isle of Saint-Louis in the river Seine at the heart of the city, very close to where the old parlement had met, the
palace was never a suitable venue, and when a gallery collapsed in mid-session, injuring members of the public and a number of deputies,’ the Assembly had to move again. This time it convened in the Manège, a long, narrow building originally designed as Louis XV’s riding school, prominently situated on the right bank of the river Seine.
between the Tuileries garden and the Feuillants monastery. Here too there were problems: overcrowding, bad acoustics and inconveniently small public galleries. At Versailles there had been room for around three thousand spectators, but now there were just two galleries, one at either end of the Manège, with only a hundred seats each. There was a third
gallery halfway down the hall, but admission to this was by ticket only. Soon an avid traffic in these tickets developed, along with a new practice of strategically positioning ‘claques’ of people in the gallery to hiss, applaud or throw missiles at the speakers.

It was amidst this chaos that Robespierre resumed his struggle to make something
of himself and the Revolution – projects that had already converged in his mind. His new lodgings at number 30 rue Saintonge, in the Marais quarter, were comparatively cheap and tranquil. Living some distance from the city centre, however, he had to travel two miles to reach the Assembly, by foot or carriage, through congested streets. An acquaintance
remembered being stuck in traffic with him one morning en route to the Manège: ‘our cab stopped at the corner of the rue Gréneta owing to a crowd which was hurrying to the rue St Denis. He was impatient so I got out to see what was stopping us. I came back and told him, “It is a deputation which is going to present the Assembly with a model of the Bastille made
from one of its stones.” “Pay”, he said “and let us get down and go on foot. A Bastille, all the Bastilles in the world will not hinder me from going to my post.””
Part III

Reconstituting France (1789–1791)
5

The National Assembly in Paris

ROBESPIERRE’S LODGINGS IN
the rue Saintonge were on the second floor, a sign of relative impoverishment in status-conscious Paris, where ground- or first-floor apartments were highly prized, as they still are today. \footnote{1}
Since 12 August, he had been paid 18 livres a day as a deputy to the National Assembly, plus arrears backdated to 27 April which would have amounted to a
lump sum of over 2,200 livres – more money than he had ever had in his life. And yet he still felt himself to be poor and seemed so to others. A penurious journalist and playwright named Pierre Villiers, who claimed to have worked as Robespierre’s secretary for seven months in 1790, included some rare domestic details about Robespierre’s life in his
memoirs.² Villiers remembered: ‘He was very poor and had not even proper clothes. When the Assembly decreed mourning for Benjamin Franklin I asked a young friend of mine to lend him a black suit, which he wore, though its owner was 4 inches taller than he was.’³ The secretary’s memoirs, like those of Charlotte Robespierre, are unreliable,
and should be treated cautiously as suggestive rumours – not robust facts – about Robespierre’s home life. ‘I had some quarrels with him,’ Villiers recalled, ‘and later he would have killed me if he had remembered me.’

As in more ordinary households, some of their bitterest fights were over money. Charlotte had noticed her brother’s lack of interest
in money when she kept house for him in Arras, and his renowned indifference to bribes was one of the sources of his nickname the Incorruptible. Villiers, who claimed to have worked for Robespierre free of charge, was irritated by his unworldly attitude to finances: ‘Several times I have known him refuse offers of money which required from him no return,
not even thanks, and if sometimes I allowed myself to insist on his accepting, he abused me. He was of a fiery temper which he always fought to control, and nearly every night he bathed his pillow in blood.’⁵ Perhaps Robespierre had nosebleeds (people with high blood pressure and fiery tempers often do). These certainly would have left him anaemic
and contributed to the unusual pallor of his skin that many contemporaries noticed. Each morning, Villiers arrived to help him with the volume of correspondence he received as an increasingly prominent member of the National Assembly. Deputies could frank letters or reclaim their expenditure on postage associated with the Assembly's business.
Robespierre, parsimonious by nature, was fastidious about his record-keeping. He always took the Assembly’s business seriously, which was more than could be said for some of its other members. Villiers remembers one of them, a deputy from the department of Mont Blanc, franking a parasol for his mother ‘which travelled in consequence free of cost’. It
was inconceivable that Robespierre would behave like this – his principles forbade it. And yet admirable as they were, there was already something unnervingly vehement about these principles. ‘I arrived one morning at his house earlier than usual,’ Villiers writes. ‘He was striding about his room. “Good heavens!” I said, “Your Assembly has
held a regular witches’ Sabbath last night, a fine piece of work!” “What is the matter my fine aristocrat?” he replied. “Your colleagues”, I said, “have abolished titles of nobility, ribbons and sashes.” “Ah”, he said “you should have been there to shout out *Hang yourself Robespierre!* Too bad you were not there to do it.”

According to Villiers (a
dubious but evocative source), one of the first things Robespierre did when he got to Paris was to find a mistress, a woman of twenty-six who worshipped him. In the Assembly and public press he was already acquiring the reputation for irreproachable purity that was another source of his enduring nickname: the Incorruptible. For this, or
other more personal reasons, his relationship with his mistress, whoever she was, came to an abrupt end. As Villiers remembers, the end was ugly. For a time, Robespierre diverted about a quarter of his modest funds towards supporting this woman (which suggests that she was even poorer than he was), then suddenly cut her off after refusing to admit her
Perhaps he sat at his desk and pretended, as many do in the aftermath of a failed or indiscreet love affair, that nothing whatsoever had happened. Villiers says he found himself in the unenviable position of facing the distraught woman on the doorstep when she tried repeatedly to talk to Robespierre; he concluded that she had been ‘treated
pretty badly’. No other trace of the affair remains, but someone embarrassed, priggish, callous or just frightened enough to refuse kindness to his former lover would surely have destroyed any material evidence well in advance of posterity. 9 Throughout his short life, women loved Robespierre: his combination of strength and vulnerability, ambition
and scruples, compassion and refinement attracted women with strong defences against obviously vulgar men, but none against the seemingly sensitive. It is entirely plausible that, after an initial rush of tenderness, Robespierre felt guilty and ashamed of his emotional or sexual liaison, so ended it with brutal efficiency, sparing his own feelings first, and
reminding himself that he was, after all, a public figure with responsibility towards the future of France. If so, his behaviour was not admirable, but at least understandable.

About his busyness at this time, however, there can be no question. In November 1789 he wrote again to Buissart after an interval of many months:
My dear friend, I know you are sulking with me; and I cannot blame you. Despite all the good reasons I could give you to justify the long silence there has been between all my friends and me, I am forced to recognise that you deserve to be an exception, and I
ought to do the impossible and find the time to write to you. There is nothing more I can do except ask your forgiveness and make good my negligence.\textsuperscript{11}

Buissart can hardly have been as much in need of a word from Robespierre as the distraught woman outside his
door. But this was a far more agreeable letter for him to write, detailing as it did the steady rise in his reputation within the National Assembly and his precious contributions to its debates. The letter reveals someone entirely devoted to current politics, swept up in the Assembly’s affairs and completely out of touch with his former life: ‘What is going on in Artois?’
What is said? What is thought? … Who is in charge? Please inform me on these matters and tell me if the National Assembly’s decrees, especially those concerning provisional reforms in the criminal procedures, are registered and observed by the courts.’ Robespierre wrote as if he had almost forgotten that practising law in Artois had
once been the summit of his professional ambitions. He had moved very far away in the six months since he left, so after apologies for his long silence, and perfunctory enquiries about how the Revolution was going in Arras, his letter soon turned to the constitutional debates.

These debates had begun before the Assembly departed from Versailles and followed
the king to Paris. They were conducted in an inefficient manner; instead of arguing their points against one another and advancing their understanding of the constitutional question under discussion, the deputies spent their time reading out prepared speeches. Repetition, redundancy, refutation of points that no one had yet asserted and so
on abounded. At the heart of these poorly arranged discussions there was the problem of Louis XVI: how could he be incorporated into the new constitution? Could he be trusted? Would a monarch who was accustomed to absolute sovereignty play the more limited role of constitutional monarch in good faith? In his letter to Buissart, Robespierre
explained his grave reservations about the Assembly’s decisions so far. He was moved by these doubts to raise a deep and politically subversive question that seemed to him no less urgent in the autumn of 1789 than it had ever been: ‘Are we free?’ The new constitution was beginning to take shape. The Assembly had already firmly rejected
the British constitutional model with its dual legislative chambers, the House of Commons and House of Lords. An aristocratic second chamber would have been too inflammatory and dangerous in France where noble privileges had only recently been abolished. So the deputies decided that under the new constitution legislative power should be
entrusted to a single body of 745 elected representatives. This raised the question of an executive veto over legislative decisions. What was the best way to build safeguards into the legislative process? Should the king be given an absolute veto, or only a suspensive veto? The latter would allow him to delay new laws for a fixed period of time, but not to
permanently prohibit any he disagreed with. Would Louis XVI use either kind of veto in the interests of the people?

Mirabeau thought that an absolute executive veto over legislation was essential to the future of the monarchy – he did not see how any kind of constitutional monarchy could be viable otherwise, and he intended to argue the case before the Assembly.
Mirabeau was a brilliant orator. Unlike Robespierre’s weak, wheedling voice, Mirabeau’s was ‘full, manly and sonorous; it filled and pleased the ear. Always powerful, yet flexible, it could be heard as distinctly when he lowered as when he raised it.’ His intellect was flexible too and he could so easily incorporate pencilled notes passed to him from the
floor as he spoke that one contemporary compared him to a magician who tears a piece of paper into twenty little bits, swallows each of them separately, then finally produces the piece whole again. But as he mounted the tribune to deliver a speech on the veto, his gifts failed him. Working and playing harder than ever, despite being plagued by bad health,
Mirabeau had fallen into the habit of relying on other people to write most of his speeches and journalism, and was now faced with a text he had not even read. Later he confided to a friend that this was the only time in his entire political career that he broke into a cold sweat at the tribune. The speech before him was almost unintelligible, dry, obscure
and completely unsuited to the general mood in Paris, where, urged on by the popular press, people were frenziedly opposing the ‘monstrous’ prospect of an absolute veto. Mirabeau tried to extemporise. He digressed. He inveighed against despotism in general. Then he cut his speech short. The prime opportunity for strengthening Louis XVI’s
position under the new constitution had just been lost through the inattentive overconfidence of the king’s most powerful ally inside the Assembly.

The abbé Sieyès argued that the king should have the power to sanction the law; but any law he refused to sanction should be subjected to an alternative checking mechanism – it was, after all,
the people who were sovereign. Earlier in 1789, Sieyès’ lucid intellect had had a dramatic effect on the deputies, altering the terms and course of their debates, by redefining the Third Estate as the nation. Now he was trying to redirect them again by attacking the widespread assumption that in the absence of a House of Lords to regulate legislative
decisions, the king must be given a veto of some kind. Robespierre was one of the few who immediately recognised the radical potential of Sieyès’ argument – not the finer details of his ideas for organising legislative power, but his forthright assertion of the principle of popular sovereignty. This was one of the political principles to
which Robespierre was vehemently attached, and he was inspired to compose a passionate and lengthy speech of his own on the veto question.

He began by berating the misguided pragmatism of many of his fellow deputies. Thinking that some kind of executive veto was inevitable in the circumstances, they were prepared to vote for the
lesser of two evils: a suspensive rather than absolute veto. Instead, Robespierre invoked fundamental principles: the power of truth, the safety of the people, liberty, equality, justice and reason. He insisted that the Assembly must remain faithful to these principles when making its constitutional decisions – anything less would be a
disgraceful abuse of its authority. The all-important power to make the laws belonged to the sovereign people and must only be exercised by their representatives. Of course it was important to make sure that the laws created would be good, fair and useful, but that outcome could not be achieved by executive veto. Robespierre outlined some
alternative methods: representatives elected to the legislature should serve for only short periods of time, after which they would rejoin ordinary citizens, and so have an interest in passing only impartial laws. Citizens should be elected only on grounds of virtue and merit, with no other distinctions taken into consideration. No representative should
continue in the legislature beyond the initial period for which he was elected.

Having worked hard to set out his principles with clarity, Robespierre was frustrated to find himself prevented from delivering his carefully planned speech. Increasingly desperate to do so, he tried convincing the Assembly that every deputy should have the opportunity
to speak on a matter as important as the veto before voting could begin. Other members of the Assembly were impatient with his suggestion and keen to move on to other constitutional questions, so despite some dissent and disorder, the voting soon went ahead without the benefit of Robespierre’s speech. The proposal for the king’s
suspensive veto was passed, 673 votes in favour, 325 against. This meant that when the constitution came into effect, Louis XVI would be able to delay new laws for the duration of two successive legislative sittings (a maximum of three years).\textsuperscript{14} Robespierre consoled himself by publishing his speech at the end of September and applying his political
principles rigorously to the remaining constitutional questions facing the Assembly.

Some months later, in the rue Saintonge, there was yet another early-morning row. Villiers arrived keen as always to gossip about the Assembly’s constitutional debates before settling down to work. ‘I cannot conceive how any subjects can treat
their king so unworthily,’ he remarked to Robespierre, sure of provoking a testy response, no doubt. ‘They will finish by killing him like the English did their unhappy Stuart.’ ‘So you see yourself a subject do you?’ Robespierre asked him. ‘Yes I do,’ replied Villiers provocatively. ‘You have spoken of Charles,’ came the reply, ‘well, the English freed by his death should have put
an end to his line.’ It is likely that Villiers embellished this anecdote. Publicly, Robespierre was working hard to establish a constitutional monarchy. Like everyone else, he could see that the presence of Louis XVI made it impossible to draft a constitution with a wholly new executive power, as the Americans had done in their revolution. Instead the
Assembly had to compromise and design a new role for their existing monarch. The radical deputies did so grudgingly and with a great many suspicions. Even so, there was never any suggestion in the Assembly (and almost none outside it either) that the king should simply be deposed, still less executed, and France declared a republic.
If Robespierre was not overtly republican in 1790, he was nevertheless the Assembly’s leading advocate of democratic principles. He passionately opposed the plan to divide French citizens into two groups, active and passive (citoyen actif and citoyen passif), according to whether they paid a minimal amount of direct taxation. Despite Robespierre’s
protests, the Assembly went ahead, limiting the franchise to active citizens and withholding it from passive citizens whose tax rating was not equal to the proceeds of two days’ labour. In this way an estimated 39 per cent of male citizens were refused the vote, many of them pauvre, vulnerable and disadvantaged: the very people Robespierre was
determined to help.  He was further appalled by the suggestion that only active citizens should be eligible to join the National Guard. To his mind the distinction between active and passive citizens contravened the Declaration of Rights. In introducing this distinction between the free and equal citizens of France, the Assembly, he insisted, had
betrayed the fundamental principles to which it had only recently committed itself. Similarly, he objected to the *marc d’agent*, a further qualification the Assembly thought of imposing on those who wished to stand for election that would require them to pay taxes worth about 53 *livres*, well over ten’ times the amount of direct taxation necessary to become an
active citizen. In this way Robespierre began the long campaign for universal suffrage in France. Using the example of Artois, he showed that the proposed distinction between active and passive citizens would disenfranchise most of the region, currently paying much more indirect than direct taxation. And he pointed out that there were very few in Artois who would
be eligible for election if the marc d’argent were introduced. His argument was strong enough to win Artois, and other regions similarly affected, exemption from the proposals until the country’s whole system of taxation could be reorganised. But he was not universally applauded. In the Assembly he was accused of encouraging his constituents
not to pay tax, and in Arras he was accused of slandering the region by claiming it had not paid tax.

Indignant, Robespierre drafted a spirited reply to his detractors, and had it countersigned by his fellow delegates from Artois:

Although M. Robespierre needs no other testimony to his
patriotism than that of his conduct, and of his public reputation, we have much pleasure in giving him proof of the esteem and affection with which he is regarded by all his colleagues ... He has always zealously defended the cause of the people at large, and of public liberty,
as well as the special interests of Artois.  

Be that as it may, it was quite clear that Robespierre’s regionally focused arguments and concerns came second to his passion for abstract political principles. Artois provided him with a convenient argument against the Assembly’s electoral proposals, but the people,
public liberty, and the inalienable right of every citizen to vote were closer to his heart. Already isolated for his commitment to universal male suffrage, he went on to argue for the rights of excluded groups like actors, Jews and West Indians living under French colonial rule.

The rationalisation of French
administration that had been so long postponed under the Old Regime was happening at last. The Assembly went from strength to strength, its committees working overtime to come up with suitable proposals for this, that or the other part of the new constitution, which was slowly but surely coming into being. If the new regime were to be genuinely representative
of the people, it would need to be securely founded on a nationwide system of carefully organised elections. In the light of the chaos that had characterised the elections to the Estates General in 1789, most deputies agreed that there was a strong case for reorganising France into new departments, districts and cantons. Future elections could then be
conducted and local government administered in a clearer, fairer, more convenient fashion. The abbé Sieyès was especially interested in these plans and very influential in shaping them. Unlike most – perhaps even all – of his colleagues in the Assembly, he had definite ideas about how to institute representative government. In fact, he had been turning
them over in his mind for years. ‘For a long time I have sensed the need to divide the surface of France afresh. If we let this occasion pass, it will never return, and the provinces will keep their esprit de corps, their privileges, their pretensions, their jealousies, for ever.’

After much discussion, the Assembly fixed the boundaries of eighty-three
new departments and restructured municipal power throughout the country.

Restructuring municipal power in Paris proved more complicated. During the elections to the Estates General in 1789 the city had been divided into sixty electoral districts. After the elections were over, the electoral assemblies in each of these districts ought to
have disappeared. However, in the course of the eventful year that followed, many of them transformed themselves into lively debating clubs and even assumed some of the responsibilities of local government. In this way, the districts became permanent and provided a focus for the political activity of many ordinary Parisians. At the storming of the Bastille, they
converged on the Hôtel de Ville and established a new municipal committee for governing revolutionary Paris. The driving force behind this committee (or Commune de Paris, as it was known) came from the vocal crowd of political activists who had brought it into being. Some of these activists, Georges Jacques Danton, for example, and
others from the Cordeliers district on the left bank of the river Seine, were far more radical than the moderate majority on the new committee. As captain of the citizens’ militia, or National Guard, in the Cordeliers district, Danton was fast becoming a rabble-raising force to be reckoned with in his own right. A tall, broad, athletic man with a rugged
face and rough, loud voice, he clashed bitterly with General Lafayette, the commander-in-chief of the National Guard over the organisation of Paris. Lafayette wanted to see a strong municipal authority at the city’s centre, supported by well-disciplined National Guards, whereas Danton championed the freedom of Paris’s sixty districts to a greater amount of
representative and administrative independence. Danton saw no reason to back down.

At first it was unclear whose side the Assembly was on. Many of the deputies were grateful to the radical Paris districts for bringing about the fall of the Bastille and thus augmenting their own authority over the king. But when it came to
discussing the reconstitution of Paris’s municipal power, the Assembly proposed abolishing the sixty districts and replacing them with forty-eight sections. This seemed a deliberate attempt to break up groups of political activists; certainly Danton saw it as a direct attack on his local power base. Inside the Assembly, Robespierre was a staunch defender of the
districts. Addressing his colleagues, he argued for retaining the sixty districts, at least until the new constitution had come into effect, for the purpose of surveillance.

In this city, the home of principles and opposed factions, it is not possible to rely on the resources of
ordinary means against those who menace liberty; it is necessary for the city in general to conserve its achievement and yours. Think of where you are: although you have done a great deal, you have not done everything yet. I dare say that you ought to be more
anxious now than if you had not already begun your [revolutionary] work … Do not be seduced by a deceptive calm – peace must not be mistaken for the sleep of carelessness.  

If he hoped to frighten the Assembly or help the Cordeliers with such rhetoric,
Robespierre failed. Mirabeau answered him in an ironic, scornful tone: ‘M. de Robespierre has brought to the tribune a zeal that is more patriotic than reflective … We must not mistake the exaltation of principles for sublime principles.’ In other words, Mirabeau warned his colleagues to be careful; to identify the actual content of Robespierre’s arguments and
not merely respond to his passionate presentation. Several of the newspapers commented on Robespierre’s hysterical and anxious tone. In the Assembly, reactionary deputies who usually opposed him applauded loudly on this occasion. Maybe they thought he had discredited himself by making such a bizarre intervention, or perhaps they believed that retaining the
sixty districts would lead to a backlash against radical deputies like Robespierre. By the end of the debate, however, the districts were a lost cause. The Assembly voted to abolish them, and the Cordeliers were merged into the new section of the Théâtre Français before the end of the year. Since the Cordeliers had a policy of deferring to the Assembly’s decisions, they
focused their hatred and resentment elsewhere: on General Lafayette, on Bailly, mayor of Paris, and on the city’s Commune. Their constructive energy went into forming the Cordelier Club to keep alive the district’s revolutionary spirit. It met on the left bank of the Seine, in the monastery church of the Cordeliers (or Franciscan Observantists). Danton, who
lived nearby, went there every morning at 9 a.m. when the tocsin was rung. Already it was his club: a rallying point for working men who paid just a penny a month to belong. Its doors were always open.

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The future of the Church and its enormous wealth (60 million *livres* according to
one mid-eighteenth-century estimate) was the next divisive issue facing the Assembly. When they destroyed the remnants of feudalism on the euphoric night of 4 August 1789, the deputies had agreed to redeem Church tithes instead of simply abolishing them without compensation. But since then there had been signs of reneging on this
promise. ‘They wish to be free, but they do not know how to be just,’ complained the abbé Sieyès about some of his colleagues in the Assembly. It was obvious to everyone that the clergy could not continue as a separate privileged order now that the nation had asserted its inviolable right to sovereignty. But, Sieyès insisted, this did not mean
that its property could be appropriated illegally – the right to property, after all, was one of those recently enshrined in the Declaration of Rights. Besides which, the clergy (unlike the nobility) was much more than a parasitical elite: it provided crucial services in areas of health and education and cared for the poor, in addition to organising the religious
ceremonies still central to the lives of most French people. From this perspective, the Church was a branch of public administration that would need to be incorporated into the new constitution or remodelled under it: the Assembly must reconcile the remnants of the Old Regime’s religious institutions with its new revolutionary principles.
These arguments drew down torrents of abuse on Sieyès’ head. Could the radical theorist of 1789 have turned reactionary overnight? Was the author of the incendiary pamphlet *What is the Third Estate?* first and foremost a conservative priest after all?

‘Are you going to abandon the role of legislators to reveal yourselves as – what? Anti-priests?’ sneered Sieyès
in response to his critics.\textsuperscript{21} But as so often, his biting cleverness and sharp reasoning were wasted on the unruly Assembly, cheered on by anti-clerical journalists and spectators in the public gallery.

Robespierre was neither anti-priest nor anti-clerical. Indeed, it is often hard to tell where he stood on the future of the Church. On the motion
to confirm Roman Catholicism as the state religion he was silenced: ‘M. de Robespierre was about to speak, when someone demanded a vote.’

Tantalisingly, we will never know what he might have said. On other occasions, when he did manage to make himself heard, Robespierre’s interventions were idiosyncratic. Sometimes he
was as vehemently critical as he had been when he lost his temper with the Archbishop of Nîmes back in Versailles; and often he returned to the interpretation of Christian doctrine that had been evoked on that occasion. Christianity, in his view, was the religion of the poor and the pure at heart – conspicuous wealth and luxury should have no part in it. Sell everything and
give to the destitute – this was the advice Jesus Christ gave his followers, and Robespierre echoed it in the Assembly’s constitutional debates. When the question of what was to be done with Church lands and revenues arose, he urged the nation to appropriate them: ‘Church property belongs to the people; and to demand that the clergy shall use it to help
the people is merely to re-apply it to its original purpose.’ In itself this was a very common line of argument, but Robespierre added his peculiar stamp to it – according to him, the poor were oppressed not only by their hunger and other neglected needs, but also by the scandalous spectacle of self-indulgent clerics insensitively squandering
what was rightfully theirs. The poor were scandalised and their moral outrage was more than justified.

A few weeks later he made another characteristically odd intervention, arguing that ex-monks were entitled to more generous pensions than they were being offered by recently suppressed religious orders. It was impossible, he
said, to estimate the real wealth of these orders. They had been living in fear of the Revolution that had now arrived and had long been preparing for it by carefully concealing their assets. Here was an early example of Robespierre’s growing tendency to suspect hidden conspiracies. Church wealth was indeed difficult to quantify, but more because it
took so many different forms and was diffused throughout the whole country than because counter-revolutionary monks and clerics had been scheming to conceal it. Later in 1790, the Assembly published a list of the revenues of all the archbishoprics, bishoprics and abbeys, including the information that the Abbey of Saint-Vaast in Arras had an
income of 400,000 livres and the Bishop of Arras drew a stipend of 92,000 livres – such figures would have confirmed Robespierre in his perceptions of ecclesiastical decadence.

Robespierre made his longest and most interesting speech on the Church in May 1790 when the Assembly was embroiled in discussions about the new Civil
Constitution of the Clergy. This document had taken a year to draft and would – it was hoped – reconcile what remained of the Church with the Revolution. In fact, it plunged France into violent strife and would later be regarded (by the abbé Sieyès among others) as the Assembly’s first really serious mistake. In essence, the proposals rejected the
Pope’s authority over the Church in France; reduced the number of dioceses from 137 to 83 (thus aligning them with the country’s new administrative departments); stipulated that the clergy would now be paid by the state; and provided for the election of priests and bishops by the people. Robespierre spoke in support of all these changes. As usual,
he argued from clear principles to destructive effect. He defined priests as public officials, ‘simply magistrates whose duty it is to maintain and carry on public worship’. Any aspect of the Church that was not useful to society must go. Cathedrals, religious colleges, even bishops and priests, if they were not publicly useful, would have to disappear.
Robespierre was especially pleased by the prospect of the people electing their own Church officials. In accordance with his strict democratic principles he dismissed the suggestion that the existing clergy might play a prominent role in such elections; instead the clergy should be chosen through the pure unmediated expression of popular will.
Towards the end of his speech, Robespierre suddenly did something outrageous: he raised the issue of married priests. Many of his colleagues agreed with him that the clergy could not continue as a privileged order, that ministers of the Church were not substantially different from any other public officials and should be chosen by the people – but an
end to celibacy and all the trouble this would cause with the Pope in Rome was a step too far for the Assembly: a barrage of disapproval cut off Robespierre’s speech. It is somewhat puzzling that he took it upon himself to propose something so contentious. One possible explanation is that he was attempting to steal Mirabeau’s thunder because
he had designs on the radical leader’s mantle. The great orator himself had commissioned one of his several ghostwriters (a Swiss man named Reybaz) to prepare a speech on priestly celibacy, and he was furious when Robespierre pre-empted him by ineffectually raising the matter in the Assembly. 25

Back in Arras, Augustin was particularly unnerved by
this development. He wrote warning his brother:

Your motion for the marriage of priests has given you the reputation of an unbeliever among all our great philosophers in Artois … You will lose the esteem of the peasantry if you renew this motion.
People are using it as a weapon against you and talk of nothing but your irreligion, etc. Perhaps it would be better not to support it any more … Let me know if you would like me to come to Paris.\textsuperscript{26}

For all his concern about Robespierre’s local
reputation, Augustin was desperate to join him in Paris at the centre of the Revolution. Meanwhile, at his desk in the Marais, Robespierre was inundated with letters: ‘Poems in Latin, French, Greek and even Hebrew arrived from the four corners of France, poems of 500, 700, 1500 couplets rained down upon the rue Saintonge.’ Wry as ever, he
remarked to his secretary across his bursting postbag, ‘Do you still believe there is a shortage of poets in France? They are, at any rate, pouring forth from the cloisters and monasteries.’ According to Villiers, Robespierre dutifully acknowledged all these missives and meticulously reclaimed the postage. Whether or not they supported his views, they
were evidence that his reputation outside the Assembly continued to grow. ‘I doubt if a single law that he has proposed has ever been carried,’ said his old school friend Camille, as the constitutional debates drew to a close in 1791. But despite this Robespierre was fast becoming a figure in national politics.
The journalists and spectators who came to observe the Assembly from the public galleries at the Manège were not the only source of Robespierre’s growing reputation. He also owed his fame to the Jacobin Club, an outgrowth of the Breton Club that had met in Versailles at the Café Amaury. After the move to Paris, some of the original members of the
Breton Club rented the refectory of a Dominican monastery, conveniently close to the Manège, as their new venue. In Paris, the Dominicans were nicknamed the Jacobins because their first religious house in the city was in the rue Saint-Jacques. Over time this nickname was transferred to the political club meeting in the monastery, but initially
the remnants of the Breton Club called themselves the Society of the Friends of the Constitution. [30] Whereas the organisation of the Breton Club had been obscure, the new club established clear rules and regulations. There was to be a president, four secretaries and a treasurer, and all these offices were to be rotated. The club would admit members who were not
deputies to the National Assembly, but charged a relatively high price for membership (12 livres to join and 24 livres annual subscription), intending to attract only educated and serious-minded male supporters of the Revolution (women were restricted to spectator seats). Aside from covering the club’s running costs, the membership
subscriptions were used to finance the publication of important speeches, which broadened the club’s influence. The candlelit meetings in the old monastery gradually acquired a central role in revolutionary politics. At the Jacobins, most evenings a week, there was the opportunity to analyse in close detail the progress of the Assembly’s constitutional
debates. It was here that the self-appointed guardians of the Revolution continued to define its objectives. Any member of the club whose revolutionary principles were deemed inadequate could be expelled. From 1790 political clubs all over France began affiliating themselves to the Paris Jacobins, and a nationwide correspondence network came into existence.
Robespierre rapidly grasped its political potential. The counter-revolution was gathering momentum throughout the country following the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. He could see that a network of affiliated clubs of active revolutionaries was just what was needed to combat the threat posed by recalcitrant clergy and their supporters.
In Arras, Augustin helped establish a patriotic club and wrote to Robespierre seeking affiliation with the Paris Jacobins. He painted an alarming picture of counter-revolution in Artois, where the patriots were strong but isolated and embattled. Exaggerating wildly, Augustin claimed that they were surrounded by flames, following a series of
unexplained arson attacks throughout the region: ‘We are not able to discover the instigators of these fires, but are convinced that they are enemies of the public good …’\textsuperscript{31} He complained of the local government’s indifference to libels launched against the National Assembly. In particular he recounted an anecdote about Robespierre’s ex-friend
Dubois de Fosseux, now mayor of Arras. A road-builder in the village of Aire had received a libellous document that he reported at once to the mayor. ‘You have done well to bring it to me, it is very bad,’ said Dubois de Fosseux. However, upon returning home, the road-builder found an anonymous letter explaining that the libel against the National
Assembly had been sent to him so that he could read it to other peasants in his village, not report it to the mayor. Augustin implied that Dubois de Fosseux himself had sent the letter encouraging libel against the National Assembly. Robespierre was only too willing to think ill of Dubois de Fosseux after their falling-out in Arras during the elections to the Estates
General in 1789, so Augustin’s insinuation would not have been unwelcome.

Even more striking was Augustin’s hatred of local clergy. ‘It is absolutely necessary to ransack our abbeys,’ he wrote to his brother. ‘For it is among the monks that one finds monsters wanting to stain France with blood.’ In another letter, Augustin
mentions plans to convert the resources of the Abbey of Saint-Vaast into more scholarships for local children, of the kind both he and Robespierre had benefited from in their youth. But, echoing his brother’s preoccupation with the plight of the poor, Augustin remarked that it would be more fitting to use the money to alleviate the suffering of
the indigent over the coming winter. He also shared his brother’s penchant for dark foreboding: ‘I cannot hide my fears from you, dear brother, you will seal the cause of the people with your blood.’

Even at this comparatively early point in the Revolution, Robespierre was so suspicious of ‘spies in every quarter of the city, and murderers assigned to
assassinate patriots’ that he feared the name ‘Robespierre’ on the outside of an envelope would attract malicious attention. The intoxicating paranoia that would eventually permeate almost all his tactical decisions is already evident. ‘Reply to me, and put your letter in an envelope marked President of the National Assembly,’ he tells his friend
Buissart in March 1790. In April, he writes, ‘Put your letters in an envelope addressed to the Deputies of Artois to the National Assembly.’ And in May, he tells Buissart, ‘I am going to send you a letter for my brother. I do not want to address it to him directly from fear that my name will entice aristocratic hands to violate the privacy of the
Still it is important to note that Robespierre was not alone in entertaining such concerns. The daily newspaper *Chronique de Paris* carried this advertisement in October 1790:

**Coded Messages**

Anyone who wants to procure a method for rendering
correspondence
impenetrable contact
M. Loppin, Rue l’Evêque ... By this method you can confidently dictate a letter to your secretary, or any public scribe, without fearing that he will be able to guess your thoughts. Five minutes suffices to put
this method into operation.\textsuperscript{37}

It is not surprising that Robespierre grew more suspicious by the day. Like many other patriots at this time, he feared an aristocratic plot. He had made an irreversible personal commitment to the Revolution, so anything that menaced him too.
He was afraid that if the Revolution’s enemies succeeded in plunging France into a foreign war, all would be lost.

In the spring of 1790, the threat of war was suddenly real. Back in 1778, towards the end of his last voyage of discovery, Captain Cook had sailed his ship *Resolution* into
Nootka Sound in the Pacific, to what is now British Columbia. Though the Spaniards had arrived before Cook and taken formal possession of the coastline, English ships followed in his wake and set up a lucrative trade in animal pelts. These English adventurers had the full approval of their government and Prime Minister Pitt. So when
Spanish forces arrived to reclaim possession of Nootka Sound, Pitt prepared his fleet for war. Spain demanded French support under the Bourbon alliance that united the two countries. Louis XVI acknowledged his obligation and ordered his foreign minister to ready the French fleet for action. There was only one problem: if Louis XVI was still in charge of
foreign policy and could single-handedly commit the country to war, where did that leave the National Assembly? Somewhat surprisingly, from the point of view of his radical colleagues, Mirabeau urged the Assembly to accept the king’s exclusive right to declare war and make peace. He was still hoping to reconcile the king and the Assembly and thought such a
move would be a step towards establishing a secure constitutional monarchy. Robespierre, among others, vigorously opposed him.

Robespierre wanted to see the Assembly take foreign affairs into its own hands and act in a conciliatory manner that would bring about peace. Beyond this, he disputed the king’s right to declare war on behalf of France, referring to
him in derogatory terms as a delegate of the nation who must do what he was told. As so often, his contentious intervention was greeted by both murmurs and loud applause. Mirabeau, however, rose to the occasion and gave one of the most brilliant oratorical performances of his by now distinguished career. He insisted that even if decisions on war and peace
were to rest ultimately with the Assembly, the right to initiate or propose such decisions must remain with the king. Mirabeau won this point and the Assembly went on to decide that ‘War can be declared only by a decree of the Legislature, passed after a formal proposal by the King, and subsequently sanctioned by him.’ The outcome was not as radical as Robespierre
would have liked, but it was still a blow to the monarchy, and on the evening of 22 May Robespierre, his friend and fellow radical Jérôme Pétion and other leading Jacobins processed through the Tuileries gardens escorted by a jubilant crowd. Pétion, the son of a lawyer at Chartres, was two years older than Robespierre and like him had been a lawyer with literary
ambitions before the Revolution. In the Assembly the two were increasingly paired as the up-and-coming leaders in Mirabeau’s shadow. As the friends walked through the gardens, enjoying the spring blossoms on the cherry trees, the evening light and the admiration of the crowd, they saw someone watching at one of the tall windows of the
Tuileries palace. It was the small figure of the Dauphin, waving and clapping his hands.

Louis XVI and his family were already effectively prisoners in the Tuileries. This magnificent palace on the right bank of the Seine was connected to the even older Louvre palace by a riverside gallery. Commissioned in 1564 by
Henry II’s widow, Catherine de’ Médicis, and named after the tile kilns or *tuileries* that had previously occupied the site, the Tuileries palace, for all its splendour, was certainly not a desirable abode. It had stood vacant, and been used only as a theatre, for a century before the royal family were dragged from Versailles and forcibly installed in it. The palace was
within spitting distance of the Manège, where the Assembly and its throng of interested onlookers met every day, even on Sunday. And there were many service buildings – porters’ lodges, barracks, domestic offices and stables – clustered against the palace walls, which meant that almost all its doors and windows opened on to a public thoroughfare. There
was little chance of privacy for the royals. Marie Antoinette complained that even in high summer she ‘could not open the windows for a little fresh air without being exposed to the grossest invectives and menaces’. 39 For the same reason, it was difficult for her family to take any exercise, except on the terrace next to the river, and here the air was soon thick
with insults and jeers from the angry Parisian mob.

Louis XVI’s relations with the Assembly were becoming more and more fraught as the weeks went by and rumours of foreign invasion or ‘the aristocratic plot’ multiplied. Yet, to the noisy crowd accompanying Robespierre and Pétion through the Tuileries gardens that evening in May, the
innocent applause of the six-year-old Dauphin at the window seemed a good omen: here was the heir to the throne cheering the radical deputies. Here was hope, perhaps, that the constitutional monarchy might be made to work, that king and Assembly could agree a stable form of government for France.

In Camille Desmoulins’
report of these events, he has Robespierre sneering at the revellers: ‘Why gentlemen! Upon what are you congratulating yourselves? The decree is hateful – as hateful as can be. Let that brat at the window clap his hands if he will: he knows what he is doing better than we do.’

When he opened the paper and read this, Robespierre was indignant. He wrote at
once to Camille, pointing out that he had spoken his mind in the Assembly, but had left it at that, and would never have been so indiscreet in public. In fact he had not addressed the crowd in the garden at all. At Robespierre’s request, Camille printed his complaint, but added a long editorial note:
If I insert these errata, my dear Robespierre, it is solely to flaunt your signature before my fellow-journalists, and to warn them not to mutilate in future a name rendered famous by the patriotism of its bearer. There is a righteousness about your letter, and a
senatorial weightiness, which rather hurts me, as an old College friend. You are proud, and you have a right to be, to wear the toga of the National Assembly. I like this noble conceit, and I am only sorry that all the deputies are not as conscious of their dignity as you
are. But you might at least have given an old comrade like myself something more than a nod of the head – not that I love you any the less for it; because you are faithful to your principles, however it may be with your friends. All the same, why this insistence on
my recantation? I may have slightly altered the facts in the story I told; but it was all to your credit; and if you never actually used the words I put in your mouth, still they certainly express your thoughts … You are not one of those poor creatures described by J.J. Rousseau, who
hate to have their thoughts repeated, and who say what they really think before their butler or their valet, but never in the National Assembly, or the Tuileries gardens.  

Camille was still Robespierres’s closest friend in Paris. At the end of the
year, Robespierre acted as a witness at his wedding to Lucile Horace. Their old headmaster, a priest from Louis-le-Grand, officiated.\(^{42}\) (Civil marriages had not been introduced at this stage in the Revolution, so the ceremony was a traditional Roman Catholic one, even though Camille had recently made some disparaging remarks about Christianity in his
newspaper. When questioned about these remarks before the wedding, he cheekily expressed surprise that the clergy read his paper: ‘Only sometimes,’ came the priest’s wry response.) There was even talk of Robespierre marrying the bride’s sister and making it a double wedding. Yet despite the continuing friendship, Robespierre’s newly acquired
ponderousness was beginning to irritate Camille. While Camille was a poet and a journalist, Robespierre was a deputy to the National Assembly; if at Louis-le-Grand they had been equals, now Robespierre seemed to think he was more important. In these circumstances, it was very clever of Camille to quote Rousseau. He knew how strong an impression
Rousseau’s books – with their emphasis on equality and integrity – had made on Robespierre. This was also a sly way of warning his friend against the vice of hypocrisy: another of Rousseau’s obsessions. But the charge ‘you are faithful to your principles, however it may be with your friends’ is serious. Had Robespierre really been disloyal to his friend? In this
instance there is no evidence against him at all. Camille was hurt and his accusation exaggerated. Robespierre was certainly not the only revolutionary vulnerable to injured pride.

Not long after this public tiff with Camille, a letter arrived on Robespierre’s chaotic and heavily laden desk that marked the beginning of another
important friendship with a younger man. The letter was from an officer in the National Guard of the Aisne, Louis Antoine Léon de Saint-Just – nine years younger than Robespierre, four years younger than Camille. Wild, handsome, transgressive, he was a most unlikely friend for Robespierre. Before the Revolution, Saint-Just had written a long obscene poem
called *Organt* and mischievously dedicated it to the Vatican. He wrote it while languishing in prison for six months, having been convicted of stealing and selling his widowed mother’s silver. His completely ridiculous excuse for mistreating his mother was that he needed money to consult a doctor about a disease brought on by
overwork. Nevertheless, the preface to his poem was penitent: ‘I am twenty; I have done badly; but I shall be able to do better.’ With the Revolution came Saint-Just’s chance at a fresh start. He became involved with local politics, specifically the issue of choosing a capital for the new department of the Aisne, as the Assembly’s plans for reorganising and redividing
France were taking shape. Like many throughout the country, he swore the new civic oath of ‘Fidelity to the Nation, the Law and the King’. He had already contacted Camille Desmoulins when he decided to write to Robespierre as well:

You who uphold our tottering country
against the torrent of despotism and intrigue, you whom I know, as I know God, only through his miracles – it is to you, Monsieur, that I address myself, to entreat you to unite with me in saving my poor land … I do not know you, but you are a great man. You are
not merely the deputy of a province, you are the deputy of the Republic, and of mankind.  

All Saint-Just actually wanted Robespierre (whom he had never met) to do was to sign a petition in support of his village in the Aisne, Blérancourt, which was engaged in a dispute over
trade with the neighbouring town of Couci – it would have been hard to find a more parochial problem. So why did Robespierre keep this short letter, from someone he did not know, on a topic of little interest to him? It was found among his papers after he died when so many other letters had been lost or disposed of. Perhaps it was true, as Camille claimed, that
Robespierre in 1790 was already getting above himself. And Saint-Just had, after all, just compared him to God! Still, the friendship that later developed between these two men centred on their shared ideas and political passions: they had an intellectual affinity aside from any more personal emotional or sentimental attachment. ‘You are the
deputy of the Republic, and of mankind,’ said Saint-Just, and this is exactly how Robespierre saw himself, even if he had not yet put it so clearly. He might have been simply flattered by the letter. Or it could be only an accident that it survived. Or perhaps Robespierre somehow sensed the beginning of a deep and mysterious friendship that
would last until the day he died.

The first anniversary of the fall of the Bastille was close. How would Paris celebrate? Ever since Louis XVI had agreed to become a constitutional monarch, Festivals of Federation had been in vogue throughout France. They varied greatly in
size and grandeur, but centred on ordinary citizens and members of the National Guard jubilantly swearing patriotic oaths – any excuse for a public holiday as revolutionary optimism swept across the country. Why not celebrate the fall of the Bastille with a grand-scale Festival of Federation? Why not turn the Champ de Mars parade ground, a vast open
space close to the centre of Paris, into an amphitheatre with tiered seating for spectators, a triumphal arch at one end and an ‘Altar of the Fatherland’ in the middle? The king and National Assembly deputies could sit together in a specially built pavilion and watch the National Guards pass beneath the arch and swear their patriotic oath at the altar. The
only difficulty was that things had been left very late and these plans were approved just three weeks before 14 July. However, there was public spirit and goodwill in abundance at this point in the Revolution, so volunteers from all walks of life flocked to the Champ de Mars to clear and level the ground. Robespierre would have been pleased to see monks with
cockades pinned to their cassocks trampling the earth alongside soldiers, labourers and well-dressed women. Excitement, cooperation and holiday spirit accomplished the necessary, and by 14 July everything was ready.

In the midst of these last-minute preparations, Augustin wrote to Robespierre hinting, once again, that he would like to
come to Paris. He thought he ought to try and join the local delegation to the national Festival of Federation, since he was sure to be deprived of any patriotic celebrations in conservative Arras. Life there for him and Charlotte was hard, Augustin complained. They had little money and no prospects. There is no record of Robespierre’s response, but if Augustin got his way
and arrived in Paris for 14 July, he would have been proud to catch sight of his brother at the heart of the celebrations. On the day it rained, so Louis XVI and the National Assembly deputies were glad of the pavilion above their heads as they watched mud-splattered battalions of National Guards troop past the Altar of the Fatherland and swear
allegiance to ‘the best of kings’. One of the deputies later remembered, ‘I was standing behind his majesty’s seat and almost cheek by jowl with that famous rascal Robespierre.’ Had Louis XVI turned to glance over his shoulder, he might have noticed the pallid feline features of the lawyer from Arras, whose reputation was growing steadily, week by
week. Probably Louis XVI could not have said when exactly he had started to recognise the name Robespierre and attach importance to it. Certainly he did not recall the very first time he had set eyes on him, fifteen years earlier, when Robespierre was kneeling in the street outside Louis-le-Grand to greet the king on the way back from his
coronation. But Robespierre must have remembered. Standing beneath the sodden canvas, so close to the king, on this first anniversary of the fall of the Bastille, he could feel confident that he would not have to get down on his knees before anyone ever again. ‘All mortals are equal; it is not by birth but only virtue that they are distinguished. In every state
the Law must be universal and mortals whosoever they be are equal before it.’

These were the words inscribed on the Altar of the Fatherland. Robespierre was too short-sighted to read them from where he was standing, but the sentiments they expressed were emblazoned on his heart.

Despite the weather, Charles Maurice Talleyrand-
Périgord, Bishop of Autun, said Mass at the open-air altar and blessed the tricolour banners flapping hard against their poles like great wet towels. Talleyrand was lame, and for this reason had been forced into a clerical career by his family.\textsuperscript{46} After the Mass, General Lafayette, emblematic citizen-soldier and head of the National Guard, took over. The sun
broke through the clouds and the rain – almost miraculously – stopped. Glamorously mounted on a white charger, Lafayette looked down his long nose and surveyed the assembled ranks below him: forty thousand National Guards, a battalion of children, one of veterans, companies of professional soldiers and sailors, and delegates from
France’s eighty-three new departments. He turned his horse toward the pavilion, the guards parted to let him through, and there he dismounted to receive the king’s permission to administer the patriotic oath. This he did back at the altar. The heady blend of religious sentiment and militarism went down well with the crowd, and in this symbolic
way the whole country gave its support to the revolutionary actions of Paris. Afterwards, the king in turn swore to uphold the decrees of the National Assembly. Lafayette was acting as the intermediary between the people and their king. For someone who had volunteered to cross the Atlantic and fight in the American Revolution at the
age of twenty-one, he remained remarkably sanguine – his motto was still ‘Why not?’\textsuperscript{47} He wanted harmony between Louis XVI and the Revolution; he believed it possible; he fancied himself the man who could bring it about. ‘Royalty can only preserve itself by being in unison with the Revolution: otherwise it must be destroyed, and I will be the
first to contribute to its destruction. The king is king neither of the aristocrats nor of the factions; he is king of the people and of the Revolution; otherwise he may be dethroned either by the former or by the latter.’ Robespierre agreed, but he already disliked Lafayette – and within a year he would hate him.
The Festival of Federation did not impress everyone. In his newspaper, *Révolutions de France et de Brabant*, Camille Desmoulins derided it as an opportunity for Lafayette to show off, then mocked the ceremony with his depiction of a humiliated, supplicating king being dragged through the mud behind the chariot of his conquerors. A leading
reactionary deputy, Pierre-Victor Malouet (who had been identified by Robespierre at the very beginning of the Revolution as ‘the most suspect, the most odious of all the patriots’), decided that radical sectors of the Parisian press had gone too far. In addition to Camille pouring scorn on the Festival of Federation, there was also the poisonous Marat, who day
after day vehemently denounced the National Assembly in his paper. ‘IT’S ALL OVER FOR US’ (C’en est fait de nous), screamed the Ami du Peuple on 26 July, when a detachment of Austrian troops asked permission to cross the border into France. This was not yet an invasion, but a sharp reminder that the Revolution had foreign enemies. Austria,
France’s old rival for territory in Europe, was now poised to take advantage of the chaos the Revolution had brought. In addition, Marie Antoinette’s brother, the Holy Roman emperor Leopold II, was anxiously watching events unfold in France – if necessary he would intervene to save the monarchy. Just in case anyone had missed the paper, Marat posted placards
all over Paris with the same message, ending with ominous forebodings of war: ‘Five or six hundred [aristocratic] heads lopped off would have assured you repose and happiness; a false humanity has restrained your arm and suspended your blows; it will cost the lives of millions of your brothers.’

Marat claimed that he was only trying to make a strong
impression on people and destroy their complacency or ‘fatal’ sense of security in the face of the growing counter-revolution, and was not really calling for bloodshed in the street. However, his tactics appalled most of the deputies in the Assembly. On 31 July, Malouet urged his colleagues to censor Marat’s paper along with that of Camille Desmoulins. He
moved that all authors, printers and distributors of writings inciting the crowd to revolt against the law or disrupt the drafting of the constitution should be prosecuted for crimes against the nation. Marat responded with vitriolic fury in his paper, but Camille, who was a somewhat milder character, sent an address to the Assembly defending himself.
After it was read, Malouet thundered: ‘Is he innocent? Let him prove it. Is he guilty? I will conduct the case against him, and against anyone who takes up his defence. Let him justify his conduct if he dare.’ From the public gallery, Camille shouted, ‘Yes, I dare!’ This was an unprecedented flouting of the Assembly’s protocol, and the president (whom the deputies
ordered his immediate arrest. In the ensuing chaos, Robespierre intervened in his friend’s defence. ‘Do not confuse imprudence and inconsiderateness with crime,’ he entreated his colleagues. Camille managed to escape and no charges were pressed. Robespierre could sleep
soundly that night, knowing that he had proved his loyalty to his friend and that Camille now had reason to be ashamed of having doubted him back in May.

But if Marat was chastised for having spread panic with his apocalyptic posters, the fact remained that Austrian troops were waiting to cross the border into France. Who was to blame?
Who was behind this threat to the Revolution? Discussion in the Assembly now turned to these questions. Louis XVI’s war minister was one possibility; another was the leader of the émigrés in exile, the Prince de Condé. Robespierre dismissed both suggestions. He argued that the Assembly must not be too hasty in identifying a single individual as responsible for
the plot against the nation. Instead, it should urgently address the problem of how to deal with ‘all the enemies of the Revolution’. The royalist press was delighted that Robespierre, of all people, had deflected blame from Louis XVI’s ministry and the Prince de Condé, and derisively congratulated him on his new aristocratic credentials. This, no doubt,
irritated him; yet he was more worried by his suspicion that the most dangerous enemies of the Revolution were not the most obvious ones, but were those with the best disguises. Prominent individuals hostile to the Revolution were less menacing, he insisted, than the hidden enemies who were the real vanguard of counter-revolution. People were
beginning to notice and remark on his recurring paranoia. Robespierre ‘once again enlarged on the plots and conspiracies of which he alone held the secret’, reported the *Mercure de France*.\(^5^3\) ‘M. de Robespierre, as usual, spoke of plots conspiracies etc. etc. etc.,’ remarked a fellow deputy earlier in 1790, bored but slightly amused.\(^5^4\) This
distrustfulness was not, however, just a passing whim of Robespierre’s, or further evidence of his peculiar personality: it was a political obsession that would intensify throughout the rest of his career: ‘I blame those less who out of romantic enthusiasm justify their attachment to former principles they cannot abandon [i.e. defenders of the
Old Regime] than those who cover their perfidious designs with the mask of patriotism and virtue.’ Seek first the enemy within, he enjoined his colleagues. Beware of hypocrisy and corruption.

Robespierre was more prescient than he knew, since, just weeks before the Festival of Federation, Mirabeau (still the most famous deputy in the Assembly) had accepted a
substantial retainer from the court, plus payment of the overwhelming debts he had accrued over a lifetime of drinking and womanising. In return, he agreed to secretly advise the king on how to strengthen his standing vis-à-vis the Assembly. The king had promised him a further million francs when the Assembly was at last disbanded. The historian J.M.
Thompson has argued that it is unlikely that any of the deputies would have refused such an offer at this point in the Revolution – except, of course, Robespierre. For all his concerns about corruption and plots, Robespierre seems not to have suspected Mirabeau. In Versailles he had been wary of Mirabeau’s close connections with the court. But over the
intervening months his admiration for him had grown, even when they disagreed – as they often did – over a particular decree or detail of the constitution. The royalist press was quick to notice. ‘Mirabeau’s monkey’ was one of its many nicknames for Robespierre, and he was even accused of copying the older man’s hairstyle and following him
about in the street like a puppy. Mirabeau wore an enormous quantity of false black hair which dramatically increased the volume of his already enormous head: ‘When I shake my terrible locks, no one dares interrupt me!’ he bragged.\(^{56}\) It seems highly unlikely that neat, slight, fastidious Robespierre set out to copy him in this way. Really their relationship
was more distant and mutually respectful. ‘He will go far because he believes everything he says,’ was what Mirabeau said of Robespierre – conscious certainly that the same was not true of himself.  

When the royal family was brought to Paris from Versailles back in October 1789, Mirabeau had immediately noted that they
were effectively prisoners in the Tuileries palace as winter approached and Paris was in chaos. He wondered then what the city would be like in three months’ time, and answered himself grimly: ‘Certainly a hospital, perhaps a theatre of horrors.’

He foresaw strife between radical Paris and the more moderate provinces — he understood the ‘profound immorality’ of
Paris as only someone who had led his kind of dissolute life could; and he concluded that the king would somehow have to leave the capital if there was to be any hope of recovering his power and dignity. Once this proved impossible, Mirabeau tried to reconcile Louis XVI to the constitution as it was taking shape in the Assembly. But in this he had no more success
than General Lafayette, and was soon wringing his hands, exasperated by the incessant intrigue at court: ‘What woolgatherers they are! What bunglers! How cowardly! How reckless! What a grotesque mixture of old ideas and new projects, of petty scruples and childish whims, of willing this and not willing that, of abortive loves and hates!’

Now a year had
passed and the winter of 1790 was approaching. There was still a serious threat of war: civil war, war with a foreign power, or both. Discontent was mounting in the provinces. There was terrible trouble brewing over the Civil Constitution of the Clergy and the oath to uphold it imposed on the recalcitrant priests. The Assembly was increasingly fragmented and
frustrated. The country was even more bankrupt than it had been before the Revolution. And Mirabeau was seriously ill – his personal degeneration a match for the general disintegration of France.

At the beginning of the Revolution, Mirabeau suffered from jaundice, hereditary nephritis, intestinal troubles, rheumatism, swollen
legs, and a recurrent infection in his left eye. His friend Dr Cabanis remembers him drinking vast quantities of lemonade, the only treatment he had time for. The Assembly’s long daily meetings were extremely insalubrious. At the best of times the Manège was very poorly ventilated, but the quality of the air deteriorated still further in winter when
the doors and windows were kept closed and heating stoves belched smoke into the atmosphere. There were epidemics of eye and stomach infections, affecting everyone from the most robust deputies to the curious members of the public crowded into the spectator galleries. At one point, Mirabeau’s infected eyes were so sore that he covered them with bandages.
when he addressed the Assembly. The soiled bandages came off for his secret audience with the queen on 3 July when he kissed her hand and declared, in the face of all evidence to the contrary, ‘Madame, the Monarchy is saved!’ But even so, Marie Antoinette shivered in horror at the sight of the huge vulgar sick man on whom her family’s future had
come to depend. ‘You know not all the power of my ugliness!’ Mirabeau liked to boast to his friends. Yet for all his bravado, he was desperate by the end of 1790, and his advice to Louis XVI became increasingly hare-brained, unpatriotic, even treasonous. Stir up trouble between the National Guard and the Paris mob, he suggested; embarrass the
Assembly so as to suborn it; undermine General Lafayette; tamper with the press; revive the royal army, starting with the Swiss and German regiments. Exacerbate, in other words, the extent to which France was already ungovernable, so that power might, by default, be returned to the throne. Robespierre, in his darkest nightmares, scarcely imagined such
treachery.
The Constitution

AT THE BEGINNING of 1791, Mirabeau was elected
president of the Assembly, despite his deteriorating health. His friend, the Swiss jurist and political writer Étienne Dumont, remembered how ‘The irritation of his system, at this time, produced violent attacks of ophthalmia, and I have seen him, whilst he was President, sometimes apply leeches to his eyes in the interval, during the adjournment of the sitting
from the morning to the evening, and attend the Assembly with his neck covered with linen to staunch the blood.'

Mirabeau was suddenly – very suspiciously – flush with money, and far from discreet with it. Marat, vigilant as ever, kept drawing attention to this: ‘Two years ago, Riquetti [Mirabeau] was obliged to send his breeches
to the pawnshop to get six francs; today he swims in opulence ... and has three mistresses whom he loads with gifts.'² Among other flamboyant extravagances, Mirabeau bought a large property in the Marais (quite close to the building in which Robespierre rented his humble second-floor flat). Here he retired at weekends, enjoyed overseeing the
restoration and refurbishment of his grand new home, and looked forward to the coming of spring with the special delight of an ex-prisoner whose life has come right again. It was at his Marais retreat, on the night of Sunday 27 March, that he was taken seriously ill. Nevertheless, he insisted on getting up and going to the Assembly the next morning
to defend the property rights of mine-owners. He had a friend who owned a mine, to whom he remarked afterwards, ‘Your case is won, but I am lost.’ The next day, the news that he was dying spread through Paris.

It is often said that Mirabeau had syphilis, which was known in eighteenth-century Britain and Italy as ‘the French disease’ and in
France as ‘the Italian disease’, but also as ‘the great imitator’ because its symptoms were so difficult to distinguish from those of other illnesses. With typical candour, he often bragged about his venereal disease. Dumont reported Mirabeau boasting ‘that a statue ought to be raised to him by the physicians because he had discovered in the stews of the
Palais Royal, the germ of a disease thought to be extinct – a kind of leprosy or elephantiasis’. His friends were not so frank or unabashed. Dumont thought Mirabeau had acute enteritis, whereas Dr Cabanis, who treated his last illness, wanted to believe that he died of systemic complications arising from ophthalmia. But between the two of them they
recorded many of the symptoms of syphilis in its later stages. Ever since the Assembly had moved to Paris, Mirabeau had taken to travelling the short distance between his lodgings and the Manège by cab because he found it increasingly difficult to walk. His joints and his sense of balance were affected. In the autumn of 1790 a large swollen gland
developed in his neck, just below his right ear. Dr Cabanis noted that when the gland softened and shrank, Mirabeau’s left eye deteriorated, and vice versa. From this he concluded that there must be a connection between the two sites of infection, and prescribed mercury – the conventional treatment for syphilis since the sixteenth century. The
infection spread across Mirabeau’s face and neck. His energy declined rapidly, his colour was bad, his body lethargic, and his thoughts increasingly morbid. His liver weakened. His breathing was often laboured, a sign of heart disease, very typical of advanced syphilis. In the early months of 1791 he started showing signs of mental confusion and
memory loss: ‘He was slow finding ideas or expressions, and sometimes could not find them at all.’ His sufferings, in the final days of his life, were hideous.

All Paris was interested in Mirabeau’s decline. Crowds of people gathered beneath his windows, grabbing and frantically reading the regular health bulletins that were printed on demand. At the
Tuileries, Louis XVI asked for news of the dying man to be brought to him twice a day. Marie Antoinette had tears in her eyes. Complete strangers offered Mirabeau their blood. Out of premature grief, his secretary stabbed himself several times – not fatally – with a penknife. Deputations from the Jacobin Club and the Assembly arrived, Robespierre, very
likely, among them. Talleyrand, the Bishop of Autun (last seen saying Mass at the Festival of Federation but excommunicated by the Pope since then on account of his support for the Civil Constitution of the Clergy), came to visit and Mirabeau entrusted him with his final speech to the Assembly. This turned out to be an offering on testamentary law, written
by someone else, which proposed significant changes to the inheritance laws. ‘It is a very remarkable fact that, on his very deathbed, Mirabeau preserved his thirst for artificial fame, when he had so much personal glory,’ reflected his friend Dumont. Talleyrand came away observing that Mirabeau was intent on dramatising his own death, which was true, but
hardly reprehensible in the circumstances. ‘No weakness unworthy of you and of me,’ Mirabeau said stiffly to Dr Cabanis, who could not stop sobbing.

On the morning of 2 April, Mirabeau got out of bed, opened the window, and said, ‘My good friend, in a few hours, I shall die. Give me your word that you won’t leave me … Give me your
word that you won’t let me suffer pointless pain. I want to enjoy, without interference, the presence of those I love.’

By nightfall, he was dead and Paris was rioting. The crowd suspected that the leader of the Third Estate, the most famous deputy in the Assembly, had been poisoned, and wanted vengeance. ‘I go wearing mourning for the Monarchy,’
quipped Mirabeau on his deathbed: witty, politically astute and, in his own rough way, an admirable human being to the last.

The next day, deep in mourning, painfully conscious of Mirabeau’s empty chair, the Assembly received a delegation from the department of Paris, asking that the ashes of the nation’s greatest men should
be housed beneath the dome of the recently completed neo-classical Church of Sainte-Geneviève in the Latin Quarter, and that Mirabeau should be the first revolutionary honoured in this way. Someone wanted to refer these plans to the committee that the Assembly had appointed to draft the constitution, but Robespierre demanded an immediate vote
on whether or not Mirabeau was a great man. Who could doubt it the day after his death? In recent months, Robespierre had had his disagreements with Mirabeau, but now he urged the Assembly to recognise the claim of one ‘who had opposed despotism with all his might at the most critical moments’. Plans for turning the Church of Sainte-
Geneviève into a national mausoleum dated back well before the Revolution, but now the Assembly’s subcommittee approved them. And so the church became the Panthéon: Mirabeau’s final destination after a sumptuous funeral that brought the city to a standstill on the evening of 4 April. An estimated 100,000 mourners took part in the league-long procession.
Battalions of national guardsmen, all 1,200 or so of the National Assembly deputies, the Jacobins, the king’s ministers, journalists and grief-stricken members of the public: all accompanied the great orator’s remains – his heart inside a leaden urn – to his silent resting place on the left bank of the Seine. There were many orations in his honour, including one by
Robespierre. There was music by Gossec, with haunting, mournful notes for the wind instruments. The ceremonies lasted well into the night, and were sombre and grand enough to satisfy the most overblown aspirations for funereal fame — even Mirabeau’s: ‘torchlight, wail of trombones and music, and the tears of men; mourning of a whole
people – such mourning as no modern people ever saw for one man’.  

It is hard to overstate the impact of Mirabeau’s death on Robespierre’s future. A wide political vista opened behind that black-draped hearse. Into the large vacant space stepped the slim figure of Robespierre, much too small for Mirabeau’s clothes – like Macbeth, he would
have felt them ‘Hang loose about him, like a giant’s robe/upon a dwarfish thief’. He had coveted Mirabeau’s ascendancy over the Assembly. He had envied his stentorian voice, confidence, agile intellect – he might even have envied his easy candour, because for all the progress he had made since 1789, the lawyer from Arras remained awkward and painfully shy.
But as it turned out, Robespierre was spared the effort of working to usurp Mirabeau’s position. It was enough to wait patiently in the shadows, hone his own lesser talents and let the diseases that racked the unrepentant old roué do their worst. Now that Mirabeau’s tormented body was ashes in the Panthéon, Robespierre was eager to get back to the
business of the Revolution. On 13 April, when one of the Jacobins proposed that the club’s plaster bust of Mirabeau should be cast in bronze, he interjected brusquely, ‘a bust, a mausoleum, a civic crown, an oak leaf, all are equal [honours], but may I remind you that your real work relates to the public good’. He was notably less impatient
when Mme Labille-Guyard, an artist preparing an exhibition of portraits of public men for the Salon later that year, wrote asking if Robespierre would sit for her. ‘They tell me that the Graces wish to paint a likeness of me,’ he replied, ‘I should be quite unworthy of such kindness, if I did not keenly appreciate its value.’ So there was a touch of jealous...
pique in his insistence that the time had come to move on from honouring Mirabeau. ‘Mirabeau’s death gave courage to all the factions. Robespierre, Pétion and others, who dwindled into insignificance before him immediately became great men,’ remembered Dumont. ¹¹ Immediately is too strong. There were still some months to go before Robespierre
would be considered a great man. But what is true is that Mirabeau’s death was an enormous opportunity for Robespierre, just as consequential to his career as his election to the Estates General. He did not let it pass unnoticed.

Royalists were increasingly annoyed by the Arras lawyer. Who was he? Why was he so
radical, so vexatious for them in the Assembly? Rumours began to circulate. The most outlandish claimed he was the nephew of Robert-François Damiens, the most infamous person to have emerged from Arras before him. Damiens had been an unemployed domestic who tried to assassinate the previous king of France on 5 January 1757 (the year before Robespierre
was born). He chose the eve of the Epiphany for his attempt. Swathed in a cloak, he sauntered past the Swiss Guard on the palace steps at Versailles, and stabbed Louis XV in the side as he was climbing into his coach. It was an improbably naïve and simple-minded plan that very nearly worked. The king clutched his ribs, saw blood on his hands, announced,
‘Someone has touched me!’ and was carried back up the palace steps to die.\(^{12}\) He had already called for a Jesuit priest and hastily confessed his last sins, when it became clear that the wound was superficial and not at all life-threatening thanks to the shortness of Damiens’ blade and the number of clothes the king was wearing to protect himself against the cold air.
Damiens was arrested, interrogated, tortured and condemned to a gruesome death on the Place de Grève in Paris. As one eyewitness recalled:

After the tearings with the pincers, Damiens, who cried out profusely, though without swearing, raised his head and
looked at himself; the same executioner dipped an iron spoon in the pot containing the boiling potion, which he poured liberally over each wound. Then the ropes to be harnessed to the horses were attached with cords to the patient’s body; the horses were then
harnessed and placed alongside the arms and legs, one at each limb … The horses tugged hard, each pulling straight on a limb, each horse held by an executioner. After a quarter of an hour, the same ceremony was repeated and finally, after several attempts,
the direction of the horses had to be changed … This was repeated several times without success.¹³

Damiens’ horrific suffering became an iconic representation of the arcane and ritualised cruelty of Old Regime France. There was no truth in the rumour that the would-be regicide and
Robespierre were blood relations, but it gathered a flimsy credibility nevertheless. The royalist press was so keen to defame the Incorruptible that it seized on any opportunity. Yet there was a self-defeating irony in attempting to blacken Robespierre’s name and provenance by linking him with Damiens. Why should a radical revolutionary shun
identification with the emblematic victim of Old Regime cruelty? No matter what the crime, had the accused been punished thirty-five years later, after the Revolution, there would have been no flesh ripped from his breast, arms, thighs and calves with enormous custom-made pincers, no molten lead, boiling oil, burning pitch, wax and
sulphur poured on his wounds, no horses, four and then six, straining for interminable hours to pull his bleeding limbs apart. Instead Damiens would have suffered a cleaner, more humane end, in keeping with the Revolution’s penal code: ‘Every man condemned to death will have his head cut off.’

The Assembly finally got
round to discussing the new penal code in May 1791. The issue had first arisen in Versailles just before the Assembly’s move to Paris, in a series of proposals put forward by Dr Guillotin:

I Crimes of the same kind shall be punished by the same kind of punishment, whatever the rank of
the criminal.

II In all cases of capital punishment (whatever the crime), it shall be of the same kind – i.e. beheading – and it shall be executed by means of a machine.

III Crime being personal, the punishment of a criminal (whatever it
may be) shall inflict no disgrace on his family.

IV No one shall be allowed to reproach any citizen with the punishment of one of his relations. The Judge shall reprimand anyone that dares to do so, and this reprimand shall be posted up at
the door of the delinquent; and moreover shall be posted against the pillory for three months.

V The property of a convict shall never nor in any case be confiscated.

VI The bodies of executed criminals shall be delivered to
their families if they demand it. In all cases the body shall be buried in the usual manner, and the registry shall contain no mention of the nature of the death. 

Because of its imminent move, and other pressing business, the Assembly
postponed discussion of Dr Guillotin’s principles, and only took them up again several months later. The first was approved without any problems, following as it did from the abolition of Old Regime privileges – there was no question of reserving decapitation for nobles under the new constitution. The second article, however, provoked more discussion.
Was it, or was it not, desirable to extend the practice of decapitation to all cases of capital punishment? One of the Assembly’s leading royalists, the abbé Maury, thought not. A brilliant preacher, a stalwart match for the stentorian Mirabeau, and the great hope of those who opposed the Assembly’s more radical initiatives, Maury argued
against routine decapitation ‘… because it might deprave the people by familiarising them with the sight of blood’. Maury’s very interesting point was brushed aside by Dr Guillotin who insisted that hanging was a far worse public spectacle and confidently reassured the Assembly that decapitation had never been simpler or more humane: ‘Now, with my
machine, I’ll knock your head off [*je vous fais sauter la tête*] in the twinkling of an eye, and you’ll never feel it.’

At this the deputies collapsed in helpless mirth. As the acerbic historian John Wilson Croker pointed out, ‘amongst the laughers there were scores who were destined to be early victims of the yet unborn cause of their merriment’.

Despite his crude boasting,
Dr Guillotin’s machine was not yet ready, nor, strictly speaking, was it his own invention. Around the corner from the Assembly, at the College of Surgeons, a Monsieur Antoine Louis was busy reinventing the Halifax Gibbet that had cut off heads in seventeenth-century England.18

In the light of his earlier writings, we might expect to
find Robespierre supporting Dr Guillotin’s proposals. Before the Revolution he had himself argued for extending the privilege of decapitation – ‘a punishment with a certain éclat’ – and putting an end to the tradition of bad blood that tainted a criminal’s whole family with his or her shame. However, in 1791 he distinguished himself by insisting that the time had
come to abolish the death penalty altogether. He began his speech with a classical reference: on learning that the death penalty had been introduced in either Athens or Argos (the newspaper reports of his speech differ over which), the citizens ran to the temple to ask the gods to intervene and save man from such cruelty to man. For rhetorical flourish,
Robespierre pointed out that his prayers had the same content, but were addressed not to gods, but to his fellow legislators in the Assembly. He was against the death penalty for two reasons: first its injustice; second its ineffectiveness as a deterrent. He thought it unjust because society could not have rights that individuals lacked, and individuals only had the right
to kill in cases of self-defence. This, of course, left open the question as to when a society had the right to kill in order to defend itself, and how its enemies, internal or external, could be defined. Such questions had long preoccupied Robespierre, and would soon come to obsess him, fearful as he was about the threat of counter-revolution, but on this
particular occasion he set them aside to present a clear argument against the death penalty:

Note well one circumstance that decides the question: when society punishes a culprit harming him is out of the question; instead it holds him in chains, it judges him
peaceably, it may use its limitless authority to chastise him and make it impossible for him to make himself feared in the future. A conqueror that butchers his captives is called barbaric [murmurs from the floor]. Someone who butchers a perverse child that he could
disarm and punish seems monstrous.
[more murmurs from the floor].

At this point the abbé Maury interrupted, sarcastic as ever: ‘Tell M. Robespierre to go and deliver his opinion in the Forest of Bondy.’ This was slang for the badlands, haunts of bandits or outlaws, and a real forest too, just
outside Versailles, where an Austrian king had once been assassinated. Ignoring Maury, Robespierre went on to consider the death penalty as a deterrent and here his argument became more idiosyncratic. No one, he insisted, was as afraid of dying as they were of calumny – in fact, good citizens would prefer to die rather than live with the scorn
of their fellows. According to him, pride was the most dominant of human passions, stronger even than the desire to live. The death penalty confused severity of punishment with efficiency, when what was really needed was a system of punishment finely attuned to the passions that drive human nature. Robespierre was also concerned that the death
penalty might discourage the innocent from denouncing the guilty, for fear of depriving them of life. He did not elaborate on the kinds of punishments he thought suitable for those denounced by their fellow citizens. Instead, he cautioned the Assembly against allowing the sword of the law to run with innocent blood. One royalist newspaper, Journal
de Louis XVI et de son peuple, referred to him as ‘the democrat Robespierre’, but no one seems to have noticed that his arguments against the death penalty were all compatible with the most stringent social repression, should this be required to safeguard the interests of good and innocent citizens; everything he said was compatible with the famous
maxim: \textit{Salus populi suprema lex} (the safety of the people is the supreme law).

Despite Robespierre’s intervention and the applause it won him, the Assembly voted on 3 June 1791 to retain the death penalty, approving the second article: ‘Every criminal condemned to death will have his head cut off.’ At this point in the Revolution, hanging had been
discredited by mob violence, lynching and brutal murders à la lanterne where aristocratic or counter-revolutionary suspects were set upon and strung up in the street from lampposts. Camille Desmoulins had gone so far as to tastelessly style himself procureur de la lanterne.

On 7 April, less than a week
after Mirabeau’s death, Robespierre proposed and carried a decree prohibiting any member of the Assembly from becoming a minister of the king for four years after the new constitution became law. He was inspired by the earlier decree in November 1789 – aimed against Mirabeau – that had prevented Assembly deputies from simultaneously
accepting posts as ministers of the crown. Now that Mirabeau was dead, why was Robespierre bothering to extend the prohibition for another four years? As so often, this was a point of principle for him. He had studied the writings of Montesquieu and Rousseau; both had insisted on the political importance of separating legislative and
executive power. The Assembly was an extraordinary legislative body, so its members could not be ministers of the executive without confusing the two kinds of power. Not content with this, Robespierre went one step further and proposed that members of the existing Assembly should also be ineligible to stand for election to the new legislature.
under the new constitution. In an astonishing act of political self-denial, he effectively ensured that himself and all his colleagues in the Assembly would be thrown out of power when the new constitution came into effect.

Even at the time, it was unclear what exactly Robespierre hoped to achieve by this move: further proof of his incorruptibility; protection
against the possibility that his reactionary colleagues might be re-elected and he might not; some other inscrutable scheme; or simply the relentless application of one of his political principles for its own sake. Some historians have argued that — irrespective of what he thought he was doing — the result of Robespierre’s decree was the disastrous exclusion
from political life at a crucial juncture in the Revolution of the only people who had any relevant experience: those deputies who had been there from the beginning, who first in Versailles, then in Paris, watched the events unfold from the privileged vantage point of the Assembly. Others disagree and think that amidst the tumult spreading through Paris and all France, any
elections would have returned only the most extreme candidates: ‘factious lawyers – infidel sophists – club orators – newspaper writers – and unprincipled adventurers of all disreputable classes and characters’.\(^{20}\) Robespierre could not have been aiming for either of these outcomes. He was, more likely, exhibiting his fatal purity and remaining rigorously true to
his ideals – whatever the consequences.

A few weeks later he addressed the Jacobin Club on the freedom of the press. Drawing inspiration from the American example, he argued for complete absence of censorship in both public and private life; perfect liberty, he insisted, was the best, indeed the only, way to ensure that what got published was ‘as
pure, serious and healthy as your morals’. In an age as prone to pornography and libel as any other, there was something unworldly about this expectation. Yet he was nothing if not consistent. Amusingly, he thought there was no future for pornography in France, but he was still against restrictions on the exhibition or sale of obscene images: ‘The Law
must be founded on principle,’ he argued – there must be absolutely no limits on liberty. He had already intervened in the Assembly in defence of the incendiary journalism of Marat and Camille Desmoulins, but now he set out a theoretical case for freedom of the press. In a free state, he explained, each and every citizen acts as a guardian of liberty. Everyone
must be completely free to protest, in person or in print, at anything endangering liberty. If, as a consequence, public officials were to find themselves exposed to calumny, so be it:

Incorruptible men, who have no other passion besides the well-being and glory of their country, do
not dread the public expression of the sentiments of their fellow citizens. They know only too well that it is not easy to lose their esteem, when one can counter calumny with an irreproachable life and proof of disinterested zeal; if they are sometimes victims of
a passing persecution, this is, for them, the badge of their glory, the brilliant testimony of their virtue; they rest assured with gentle confidence in the suffering of a pure conscience and the force of truth which will soon reconcile them with their fellow citizens.\textsuperscript{22}
The influence of Rousseau, that ‘eloquent and virtuous citizen of Geneva’ – his emphasis on integrity, individual conscience, natural goodness and dignified independence from a gross and uncomprehending world – is stronger than ever in this passage. At this point, Robespierre was still acting on principle and according to ideals, adopting the kind of
uncompromising stance on freedom of speech and freedom of the press that might have won him an essay prize before 1789. This stance was to prove much harder to sustain in practical politics than on the printed page: within two years he was to change his mind dramatically.

Robespierre also made the remarkable suggestion that libel suits arising from
unrestricted liberty of the press should be adjudicated not on the legal merits of each case, but on the general character of the litigants concerned. In revolutionary circumstances, what could be more dangerously appropriate? The possibility of denouncing public officials not on account of some precise transgression of the law, but on grounds of their
general attitudes or reputation, would soon become an indispensable – and merciless – way of dealing with the real and imaginary forces of counter-revolution. Without this opening to trial by character, it would not have eventually become possible to convict citizens ‘of hoping for the arrival in Paris of the Austrian and Prussian armies,
and of hoarding provisions for them'; or to execute them for exclaiming ‘A fig for the Nation!’ – two examples of the ‘crimes’ later brought before the revolutionary tribunals and punished with the guillotine. While by contemporary standards Robespierre’s advocacy of complete freedom of speech was unusually liberal, his insidious suggestion that
litigants should be judged according to their characters was the exact opposite. After all, who, beside himself, could claim an irreproachable character? Who, except Robespierre, was beyond suspicion? This more ominous nuance of his argument was probably lost on the Jacobins that night in 1791, and for the time being he remained their champion
of untrammelled liberty.

It is testimony to how hard Robespierre was now working that he attended other political discussion groups on the few nights a week that the Jacobins did not meet. At one of these, the Cercle Social, he heard another discourse on the freedom of the press, two days after he had delivered his own to the Jacobins. He
borrowed the text — which had been composed by one François-Xavier Lanthenas from Lyon and read to the assembled company by the radical bishop Claude Fauchet — so he could study it more closely at home. At about nine thirty that evening, he caught a cab on the Quai des Augustins and headed back to the rue Saintonge. Robespierre, as his sister
remembered, had always been absent-minded. This time he left Lanthenas’s manuscript behind in the cab. Fauchet had only read part of it aloud to the Cercle Social, so there was a real danger that much of it would be lost for ever as a result of Robespierre’s inattentiveness. Mortified, Robespierre offered a reward in *L’Orateur du peuple* for anyone who
helped trace the speech, hoping that ‘patriots will do their best’ to recover it.\textsuperscript{23} Paris, for him, was full of vigilant patriots, hanging on the words of revolutionary orators, committing them lovingly to memory and tracking down precious manuscripts gone astray in the city’s filthy streets.
Contrary to Robespierre’s vision, many in Paris in 1791 were going about their everyday lives with little regard to the Revolution. The number of marriages and baptisms had risen significantly since the previous year and the mortality rate was falling. Judging by the small ads posted in the daily Chronique de Paris, the people still had
plenty of mundane concerns. One Mme Gentil of the rue de Richelieu offered a handsome reward for her lost greyhound. There were elegant apartments to rent with facilities for stabling horses or parking carriages, as well as plenty of more modest accommodation. Opticians, hairdressers, pharmacists, dentists specialising in teeth
whitening, and chiropodists all promoted their skills. An Italian singer just arrived in the city offered home tuition. Exchange visits between French and English children were still being advertised. Oysters, oranges and other luxurious comestibles continued to be imported. In the theatres and opera houses, the Revolution was being culturally assimilated. Jean-
Baptiste Pujoulx wrote a play about the death of Mirabeau (La mort de Mirabeau) and Luigi Cherubini’s instrumental music for it was performed in the Théâtre Feydeau for the first time in May.

There were, however, ways in which Paris had not recovered from 1789. The rearrangement of the city’s sixty districts into forty-eight
new sections had not destroyed local loyalties, and in poorer sections, like Saint-Antoine and Saint-Marcel, popular militancy did not disappear after the fall of the Bastille. Even though day-to-day policing was probably as effective in 1791 as it had been before the Revolution, tension between patriots and aristocrats, together with anti-clerical feelings exacerbated
by the disputes over the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, led to many incidents of violence. \(^\text{24}\) In April, for example, rampaging patriotic women in the rue Saint-Antoine broke into local convents and dragged the nuns into the street for public whippings. Of course the scurrilous press was delighted by this, exaggerated what had happened, and inspired
repetitions of the incident in other parts of the city. There was also widespread fear of brigands, or troublemakers, recently arrived in the capital. Such ‘enemies of the people’ could easily conceal themselves in Paris’s transient population: six out of ten people in the city at the time had been born elsewhere. The growing fear of malicious outsiders led to
demands for a new census, and the Municipal Police Department ordered a survey of the city’s *logeurs*, or people letting furnished rooms, who might be harbouring suspicious newcomers.  

In this context, the National Guard became all the more important. People throughout France had imitated the Parisians and
formed local battalions of National Guards, but the relationship of these citizen militias to the Revolution was increasingly vexed. In theory, the National Guard was designed both to protect the Revolution and to maintain public order. However, in practice these two objectives sometimes conflicted. Soon after the fall of the Bastille in 1789, Robespierre had been
horrified by the move to exclude non-tax-paying citizens \((\text{citoyens passifs})\) from the National Guard, and never ceased to oppose it. In his newspaper, on 5 December 1790, Marat – who had heard but still could not spell Robespierre’s name – had written, ‘Robertspiere, Robertspierre alone in vain raised his voice against the perfidious decree regarding
superior conscripts, but his voice was muffled ...’

Afterwards, Robespierre composed a speech on the topic, read it to the Jacobins at Versailles, then published and circulated it through the network of affiliated clubs across France. In February of the following year, he wrote sarcastically to the newly-wed Camille Desmoulins, reminding him to advertise
the published speech in his newspaper: ‘May I remind Monsieur Camille Desmoulins that neither the beautiful eyes, nor the beautiful attributes, of charming Lucile [Camille’s wife] are reasons for not announcing my work on the National Guard …? There is not at this time anything more urgent or important than the organisation of the National
Guard.’ Camille did as he was told and a notice about Robespierre’s recent work appeared in *Les Révolutions de France et de Brabant* a week later on 21 February. Even so, it was not until the end of April that the Assembly got round to discussing the subject again.

Robespierre argued that the institution of the National Guard was an unprecedented
revolutionary act, resulting from a kind of patriotism previously unknown among free or enslaved peoples. The Assembly was busy formulating constitutional laws intended to protect the people’s liberty, but only force – public force – could ultimately guarantee that liberty. ‘The National Guard cannot be other than the whole nation armed to
defend, when necessary, its rights; all citizens of an age to bear arms must be admitted without distinction.’

This idea was straight out of Rousseau, and when he spoke in the Assembly, Robespierre mentioned the philosopher by name: ‘The free cantons of Switzerland offer us examples in this area, even though their militias have a more extensive purpose than
our National Guard, since they [the Swiss] do not have any other troops to direct against external enemies. All the inhabitants are soldiers, but only when it is necessary for them to be, if I might paraphrase J.J. Rousseau.’

The French still had a professional army and Robespierre was particularly insistent that it must be kept separate from the National
Guard. He argued that because the professional army was nominally under the control of the king, Louis XVI must not be allowed to nominate the heads or officers of the National Guard; officers in the professional army must not hold posts in the National Guard; and the king and his ministers must not be allowed to deploy or discipline the
National Guard either. Robespierre was mindful of recent problems inside the professional army. During the summer of 1790, at Béthune (near Arras) and Metz, there had been a series of conflicts between rank-and-file soldiers sympathetic to the Revolution and aristocratic officers intent on maintaining old-style discipline. In Nancy things had gone completely
out of control when a cousin of General Lafayette, the Marquis de Bouillé, used severe military discipline to suppress a rebellion in the Châteauvieux regiment.

The rebellious soldiers had the support and encouragement of their local Jacobin Club, which, like many others across France, had affiliated itself to the Parisian Jacobins. But this did
not save them from the draconian measures of General Bouillé’s military tribunal: one soldier was broken on the wheel, twenty were hanged and forty-one sentenced to the galleys for life – all of which astonished enlightened citizens, who thought such barbarism had been banished from France along with the Old Regime. Even more astonishing,
though, was the Assembly’s decision to praise Bouillé for this pitiless repression. At first, only Robespierre, Pétion and a handful of other radical deputies protested. Robespierre was shouted down at the tribune. However, outside the Assembly he was supported by the Jacobins, and soon there were public demonstrations of solidarity.
with the heroes of the Châteauvieux regiment. To show their sympathy with those forty-one soldiers now toiling their lives away in the galleys, some patriots took to wearing the _bonnet rouge_: the cap of the galley slaves. Robespierre himself kept aloof from this trend and was extremely irritated when, at the Jacobins one evening, someone leant over and
dumped a bonnet on top of his meticulously maintained wig. Nevertheless, events in Nancy had made their impression on him, and he was adamant that there must be no confusion in the future between the National Guard and what remained of the Old Regime army. He wanted to see the former organised along rigorously democratic lines free of the authoritarian
hierarchy that had caused such suffering at Nancy. Throughout his speech in April he kept referring to ‘the people’, until someone interrupted demanding to know what he meant exactly. ‘I myself protest against all manner of speaking that uses the word people in a limited sense,’ he said: ‘It is the people that is good, patient, and generous. The people
asks for nothing but peace, justice and the right to live. The interest, the will of the people, is that of humanity: it is the general interest. The interest of that which is not the people, of that which separates itself from the people, is mere ambition and pride."32 This was all very well in theory, but in practice the National Guard’s dual responsibilities – to protect
the Revolution and to maintain public order – were bound to come into conflict, sooner or later, with particular sectors of this much-invoked people. Robespierre, following Rousseau, could define the people and their National Guard as one and indivisible, but this was not a definition that would hold up in a public brawl, still less a revolution.
As Easter 1791 approached, the king and queen, eager for a rest and a change of atmosphere, hoped to be permitted to leave Paris for Saint-Cloud. In this suburb west of Paris, Marie Antoinette owned a splendid château, surrounded by twelve hectares of gardens and terraces, overlooking the Seine. It was here that she had held her secret audience
with Mirabeau – the occasion on which his ugliness overwhelmed her. Now Mirabeau was dead, the king was racked by terrible headaches, and Marie Antoinette longed more than ever to escape the confines of the Tuileries palace, where privacy was impossible and she scarcely dared open a window for fear of the abuse that would be hurled inside.
Back in December 1790, the king had finally given in and signed the proposed Civil Constitution of the Clergy despite the Pope’s disapproval; but now his conscience was troubling him. At Saint-Cloud it might be possible to celebrate Easter in the old way, without political interference. However, for the last few weeks Marat had again been
spreading panic, this time telling his readers that a hostile foreign army was massing at the Austrian border, and warning, ‘It is all up with liberty, it is all up with the country, if we suffer the royal family to quit the Tuileries.’  

It was true that during the nine months that had passed since a battalion of Austrian troops asked permission to cross into
France, foreign troops had been gathering at the border. It was also true that it would be much more difficult for the Parisians to influence the course of the Revolution if the king abandoned the capital. So when the royal party tried to set off on 18 April, it was stopped by the mob. The next day, Louis XVI strode purposefully across the Tuileries gardens.
to the Manège, and addressed the Assembly:

Gentlemen, you are informed of the opposition expressed yesterday to my departure for St Cloud. I was unwilling to overcome it by force, because I feared to occasion acts of severity against a
misguided multitude – but it is of importance to the nation to prove that I am free. Nothing is so essential to the authority of the sanction I have given to your decrees. Governed by this powerful motive, I persist in my plan of going to St Cloud, and the National
Assembly must perceive the necessity of it.\textsuperscript{35}

This was a strong and dignified speech, but to no avail. Over at the Hôtel de Ville, the Municipality of Paris, urged on by Danton with the Cordelier Club behind him, decreed that the king was not to go to Saint-Cloud. The Assembly
decided not to interfere, there was nothing General Lafayette could do to help, so the king, who had behaved well and wisely, had no choice but to walk back despondently across the garden and break the news to his disappointed wife.

Marie Antoinette had been planning an escape for many months. Mirabeau had fully shared her belief that
removing the king from Paris was the only way to restore royal authority over the Revolution. All sorts of schemes had been auditioned—getting him out was, obviously, going to be very hard to pull off—but now even the famously indecisive king was determined to try. He was equally determined, however, not to leave France, not to flee as so many nobles
had done and abandon what he still thought of as a kingdom entrusted to him by God. This narrowed his list of possible destinations down to one: he must try to reach the loyal troops under the command of General Bouillé, encamped at Montmédy, near the Austrian border, about 170 miles away. Bouillé was highly regarded by Louis XVI for his successful 1778
campaign against the English in the West Indies during the American revolutionary wars, and, much more recently, for suppressing the controversial rebellion in Nancy, with cavalry that remained under his control even as insubordination spread through the rank-and-file. Bouillé could not reach the king in Paris, but if the king could get to Bouillé, they
could together start to assemble forces for reasserting royal authority, with or without reinforcements from abroad.

The most direct route from Paris to Montmédy ran through Reims. For this reason, the king rejected it, convinced he would still be widely recognised in the place of his coronation fifteen years before. Unfortunately,
the alternative road was not only longer, but also less remote, passing through many small towns, where the royal fugitives might easily arouse suspicion. Nevertheless, that was the road chosen, and the departure date was set for 20 June. The decision to travel in an unusually shaped, extra-large, custom-made coach, capacious enough for at least
eight people, did nothing to lower the risk of attracting attention. Since this striking vehicle could hardly pull up outside the Tuileries, on the night of 20 June it was parked discreetly near the city wall, while a more ordinary coach waited close to the palace on the corner of the rue de l’Échelle. This was the royal party’s first point of assembly. After 10 p.m., the
king’s two surviving children, heavy with sleep and dressed in disguises, were carried out and left in the coach with their governess. The princess asked her young brother what he thought they were going to do that evening. ‘I suppose to act a play,’ he replied, ‘since we have all got these odd dresses.’ An hour later, their aunt, Mme Élisabeth, joined them, stepping on the
Dauphin who had fallen asleep on the floor as she entered the carriage. ‘He had the courage not to cry out,’ his sister loyally recalled. Then the king and queen arrived, separately, Marie Antoinette shaken because her face had been caught for a few fleeting seconds in the lights of General Lafayette’s carriage, sweeping past unexpectedly at that late hour.
The royal family were conveyed successfully to their special travelling coach, and set off for the border accompanied by three guards in flamboyant yellow livery. If stopped and questioned, the plan was to pass themselves off as the family and travelling companions of a Russian woman, the Baroness de Korff, played by the governess. Marie Antoinette
would assume the now vacant role of governess, the king’s sister would pose as a friend named Rosalie, and Louis XVI – most improbable of all – would take the part of a valet. The Dauphin had been quite right to guess that amateur dramatics were in store. As the sun rose behind the carriage window-blinds, the occupants settled into their journey, practised their
parts and began on a picnic breakfast that lifted their spirits. It was pretty funny to think of the shock on Lafayette’s long face when he learnt of the empty beds in the Tuileries that morning. The king, always keen on lists and maps, was suddenly in his element, providing a running commentary on their progress for the benefit of his children. By the afternoon he
was relaxed enough to get out and engage people in pleasant conversation about the weather and crops as the horses were changed at relay stops. As far as the town of Varennes, fresh horses were ordered in the ordinary way by sending a courier ahead. But at Varennes arrangements had been made for a special relay of horses to be protected by a small detachment of
Bouillé’s troops. These troops drew suspicious comment from nervous locals – many of them newly signed-up members of the National Guard – even before the peculiarly shaped coach arrived in the middle of the night and squeezed through the narrow arch in the town wall. In the twenty-four hours since the escape from the Tuileries had commenced, the
royal family had got to within twenty miles of their final destination.

At Varennes everything went wrong. The special relay of fresh horses was nowhere to be seen. As the coach drove into the town, the travellers peeped through the blinds and saw groups of National Guards milling around, some carrying muskets. The yellow livery
worn by the three guards accompanying the suspicious coach shone beneath the lamps and moonlight; to make matters worse, the livery resembled that of the Prince de Condé, leader of the émigré nobles in exile, and people stopped to stare. It was exactly like the beginning of a play. None of the party could sustain their assumed identity for long –
the king’s papers were made out for Frankfort, but Varennes was not on the road to Frankfort, and besides, he had been recognised at one of the post-houses earlier in the day. At first there was general excitement – it was quite something to have Louis XVI paying the town an unexpected nocturnal visit – and there was even talk among the townspeople of
escorting the coach to Bouillé at Montmédy in the morning. However, Lafayette’s orders from Paris arrived by 5 a.m. on 22 June, along with a decree from the Assembly that the royals must return. And so they set out again, slowly retracing their path, accompanied by the National Guard and an angry, jeering crowd throwing dung at the liveried guardsmen who were
prominently seated on top of the carriage like three bright badges of shame.

Robespierre was not in Paris on 20 June. He was in Versailles for the day, visiting his friends in the local Jacobin Club, tactfully explaining his decision to give up the post of judge on the Versailles tribunal, a position he had held since 1790 but never devoted any
time to. Tact was required because he had recently been appointed Public Prosecutor in Paris and so had a good job to look forward to once the Assembly’s business was finished and the new constitution came into effect. However, he remained anxious not to alienate his friends in Versailles. Just as he had cultivated every available source of support
when standing for election in Arras, so he continued in 1791 to value each and every expression of interest in himself and his career, no matter how lowly or improbable. He definitely did not want the Jacobins at Versailles to think badly of him, especially when he was doing so well among the Paris Jacobins, so he went, in person, to apologise and
explain. By happy coincidence, his visit fell on the day of the second anniversary of the Tennis Court Oath, and he joined the local Jacobin Club in its celebrations, amidst cries of ‘Vive Robespierre! Vive the Nation! Vive the Friends of the Constitution [or Jacobins]!’ ‘No one ever deserved flattery so much as Robespierre,’ commented a
Versailles newspaper approvingly.\textsuperscript{37}

The next morning he woke to Paris in tumult. Rumours of the royal flight filled the air and Robespierre had to fight his way to work through crowds of people heading in the same direction to find out what had happened in the Tuileries. He pushed his way through and was in his seat in the
Assembly by 9 a.m. to hear what had happened. There was stunned silence in the Manège. Hoping to save the constitutional monarchy, Bailly, mayor of Paris, was maintaining that the king had been kidnapped against his will, and that there was no reason for the Assembly to distrust his ministers. However, on his desk in the Tuileries Louis XVI had left
behind – in his own handwriting – a list of his complaints against the Assembly and the constitution it was drafting. This detailed account of his reasons for fleeing Paris was tantamount to a confession of guilt. There was uproar in the Assembly and Robespierre, urging his fellow deputies to ‘Tell all good citizens to be vigilant for traitors’, could
not make himself heard at greater length in the chaos. At lunchtime he went home with Pétion, his fellow radical deputy in the Assembly, to discuss the response these unforeseen developments required. The journalist Jacques Brissot was there at lunch too, along with a newcomer, Mme Roland, both destined for political eminence over the coming
Brissot, whose father was an innkeeper at Chartres, was thirty-five when the Revolution began: just four years older than Robespierre. Thirteenth in a family of seventeen children, he had used his outstanding memory to educate himself and escape from his confined background into the worlds of law and journalism. Rather
pretentiously, he had adopted the name of a neighbouring village, and called himself ‘Brissot de Warville’ under the Old Regime. He was not elected to Versailles in 1789, but nevertheless managed to inveigle his way on to the Assembly’s Constitutional Committee and into Paris’s Municipal Assembly. Before 1789 he had founded a society to campaign for the
abolition of slavery (Ami des Noirs) and a newspaper called the *Patriote Français*. Now that he was a revolutionary, Brissot dropped the aristocratic-sounding ‘de Warville’. However, when he came to write his self-portrait – a popular genre at the time – he followed the fashion for doing so under an assumed name, and called himself
Phédor:

Phédor is not very tall: at first glance there is nothing uncommon about him; but one can see in his eyes and face, particularly when he speaks, the active temper of his soul ... He sacrifices his family to the cause of
humanity. He is too credulous, too confiding. He is a stranger to revenge, as he is to self-interest. To judge from some of his writings, he might be compounded of bile and vengeance, whilst, in fact, he is too weak to hate anyone. He has friends, but not
always of the heart-to-heart kind. He is as pleasant and easy-going in society and verbal argument as he is difficult and cantankerous in controversy. Phédor is one of those men who are at their best alone, and who are less useful to the world when they live in it.
than when they dwell in solitude.  

Brissot thought of himself as unworldly, but he kept up with fashion. He attached great importance to dressing the part of a revolutionary. He was one of the first to stop powdering his hair and start wearing the *bonnet rouge*. He had recently met and introduced to Pétion the
fascinating Manon Roland, who had arrived in Paris early in 1791 on a business trip with her husband, an inspector of manufactures at Lyon. The business completed, he was ready to leave, but she insisted on staying in Paris and attending the Jacobin Club, where she could meet and socialise with radical revolutionaries. Born Manon Phlipon, she was the
daughter of a Parisian artisan, a master engraver, who had his workshop on the Quai de l’Horloge, very close to Pont-Neuf. Her six siblings had all died at birth or in infancy. Precociously intellectual – she claimed Plutarch had been a major influence before she was nine years old – Manon grew up devouring books, teaching herself foreign languages,
memorising the Bible and impressing the local parish priest with her knowledge of theology. Whoever would her parents find to marry her? In the end it was Jean Marie Roland, twenty years her senior, who took her on when she was twenty-five. Like Brissot, she composed a self-portrait:

At fourteen, as today,
I was about five feet tall, fully developed, with a good leg, very prominent hips, broad-chested and with a full bust, small shoulders, an erect and graceful posture and quick, light step ... There was nothing special about my face apart from its fresh softness and lively
expression. If one simply added together the individual features one might wonder whether there was any beauty there ... The mouth is rather large; one may see hundreds prettier but none with a sweeter or more winning smile. The eyes, on the other hand, are smallish and
prominent. The irises are tinged with chestnut and grey. The impression they convey is of openness, vivacity and sympathy, reflecting the various changes of mood of an affectionate nature. Well-moulded eyebrows of auburn, the same colour as the
hair, complete the picture. It is on the whole a proud and serious face that sometimes causes surprise but more often inspires confidence and interest. I was always a bit worried about my nose; it seemed to me too big at the tip.
By the summer of 1791, the Rolands, Brissot and Pétion had become firm friends, so when the king’s flight to Varennes was discovered, it was natural for them to meet to discuss the implications for the Revolution. For all the fervent ideas that flew around in these circles at this time, Brissot and his friends were not at all sure how to react to
the king’s flight. Over lunch chez Pétion on 21 June there was much agonising. Was this the end of the monarchy? And what about a republic – was it necessary, or even possible, to have one in France? According to Mme Roland, ‘Robespierre, with his habitual grimace, and biting his nails, asked: “What is a Republic?”’ He suspected a plot to assassinate
the patriots and did not expect to survive another twenty-four hours. Nothing was clear. Pétion later volunteered to go and fetch the king back from Varennes, but Robespierre was more preoccupied by what was going on in the Jacobin Club in Paris. It was here, the same evening, that he made the most flamboyant speech of his career so far.
‘For me, the flight of the prime public functionary ought not to appear a disastrous event. This could have been the best day of the Revolution, and it might still be,’ Robespierre began. He told the Jacobins, calmly, directly, right at the beginning of his speech, that the Assembly had been wrong to present the king’s flight as kidnap and to
reaffirm its faith in his ministers. The Assembly had not listened to him and had disregarded his cautionary words. It was obvious, Robespierre continued, that the king had chosen to desert his post at a crucial juncture in the Revolution. The constitution was nearly finished and there was lots wrong with it, not least the ridiculous divisions between
citizens who could vote or stand for election and those who could not. Throughout France’s eighty-three new departments, treacherous priests were rejecting the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. Foreign powers (Prussia and Austria) were preparing an invasion to end the Revolution, and on top of everything else, the harvest was ready but still in the
fields: it would take only a small band of brigands to set it alight and starve the whole country. There could be no mistake: Louis XVI – or the prime public functionary, to give him the less glamorous title Robespierre preferred – had chosen to abandon revolutionary France at her most vulnerable. But that was not the worst of it:
What scares me, Gentlemen, is precisely that which seems to reassure everyone else. Here I need you to hear me out, I say once again, what scares me is what reassures all the others: it is that since this morning all our enemies speak the same language as us
... look about you, share my fear, and consider how all now wear the same mask of patriotism. 41

The real enemy, as he saw it, was right there, in Paris, mingling with the true patriots. ‘Share my fear’ was his invitation to the Jacobins to join him in the next stage of the Revolution. Here he
took the dramatic step of turning not only against the king and his ministers, but also against the Assembly that had affirmed its faith in them earlier in the day. The Assembly was wrong – Robespierre dared say it. For the public good he took the dangerous step of accusing almost all his colleagues in the Assembly of being counter-revolutionary out of
ignorance, terror, resentment, pride or corruption. Let the press term him the new Nostradamus, prophesying the future in apocalyptic mode: he was, he assured the Jacobins, ready to sacrifice his life to truth, liberty and the fatherland (la patrie). At this (according to his own newspaper), Camille Desmoulins leapt to his feet and cried, ‘We would all give
our lives to save yours!’ and the audience of eight hundred Jacobins, cramped inside the old monastery, joined in an impromptu oath to defend Robespierre’s life. It seems unlikely that Robespierre was genuinely in more danger than any of the other radical revolutionaries, fearing that the forces of counter-revolution might be galvanised into action by the
king’s flight. But even so, the Jacobins at Marseille wrote to say they would come to Paris and defend him if the need arose. And the Cordeliers Club sent an armed guard to protect him in the rue Saintonge.

Later that night, before going to bed, Robespierre made his will. The Assembly and General Lafayette had issued orders for the royal
family to return to Paris. But while they could still issue orders and be obeyed, as far as Robespierre was concerned, the Assembly and General Lafayette were mutually discredited by the king’s flight: neither could be relied upon in the continuing struggle to provide France with a legitimate constitution. In his attempt to persuade the Jacobins of this, Robespierre
succeeded in creating a schism at the club: 264 of the members who were also deputies in the Assembly left to form the Feuillants, in a disused monastery of that name across the street from the Jacobins. The Feuillants Club, led by Antoine Barnave (a Protestant advocate from Grenoble), was committed to defending the king’s role in the forthcoming constitution,
despite the discredit brought upon him by the flight to Varennes. Robespierre remained behind in the Jacobins with a handful of radical deputies, dedicated as he was to curtailing the king’s powers under the new constitution. Robespierre’s break with his more moderate colleagues was decisive; from this point on his political future rested on his influence.
over the remnants of the Jacobin Club and its network of affiliates throughout France. If Louis XVI had not fled, Robespierre would probably have settled down to his job as Public Prosecutor under the proposed constitutional monarchy. It would have been a more glamorous life than he ever hoped for in Arras, but not so very different in kind.
However, the king had fled, and Mirabeau, who might have turned the situation around and rescued the monarchy despite everything, was dead. The configuration of power in Paris was changing very fast.

The flight to Varennes had taken one day, yet the return of the royal family to Paris took four; during this time, Marie Antoinette’s hair
turned grey. They were halfway back by the time deputies from the Assembly (Pétion and Barnave) arrived to take charge of the dismal procession and protect it from the mob. Pétion and Barnave climbed into the carriage and the royal children sat on their parents’, aunt’s or governess’s lap for the rest of the journey. Despite the presence of the deputies,
violent incidents continued to plague the exhausted travellers, including a near miss with brigands in the notorious Forest of Bondy. Inside the coach, Barnave did his best to befriend the king, assuring him that it would still be possible to save the constitutional monarchy. Robespierre’s friend Pétion was much less ingratiating — but it is hard to tell if his
rudeness was deliberate or inadvertent. Afterwards he claimed that Louis XVI’s sister had fallen in love with him by the time they reached the Tuileries, which seems unlikely to say the least.

The second anniversary of the fall of the Bastille was nothing like the first. Thursday 14 July 1791 was a
beautiful summer’s day without a spot of rain, but the spirit of festive unity that had characterised the celebrations on the Champ de Mars a year earlier was lost. The king and queen did not attend, and the Assembly, instead of turning out en masse as it had before, sent a delegation of just twenty-four deputies – one of them Robespierre. General Lafayette remained prominent
on his white charger, but even he could scarcely ignore the suspicion and open hostility with which many in Paris now regarded him because of his support for the king. On the Champ de Mars the stadium had been expanded to hold more spectators than the year before, and the Altar of the Fatherland had been remodelled: in 1790 its dedication read, ‘the Nation,
the Law, the King’; in 1791 it read ‘the Nation, the Law, the […]’ – the last word was effaced. Gossec composed some music for the occasion: something innovative, but less mournful than for Mirabeau’s funeral, and aptly entitled *La prise de la Bastille* (*The Fall of the Bastille*). During the ceremony there were occasional cries of ‘No more king!’ And back in the
Manège the Assembly, meeting for business as usual despite the celebrations, heard a petition – one of many – from Danton’s Cordeliers Club, demanding a national referendum on the fate of the king who had tried to abandon the Revolution. In his newspaper, Marat wrote that he suspected the Assembly had included Robespierre in the delegation.
to the Champ de Mars to keep him away from the tribune – while his back was turned it might try to exonerate the king, that ‘crowned brigand, perjurer, traitor, and conspirator, without honour and without soul’. Vigilance, vigilance, screamed the Ami du Peuple.44

Robespierre wanted to put Louis XVI on trial. Submitting to the rule of law
could degrade no one, he insisted, not even the king. But more moderate deputies were concerned about the impact such a trial would have on the constitutional monarchy, which, after two long years of discussion and disagreement, was at last ready to come into effect. The moderates were helped by the unexpected arrival of a letter from General Bouillé, taking
the blame for the flight to Varennes on his own shoulders from the safe distance of Luxembourg. ‘I arranged everything, decided everything, ordered everything. I alone gave the orders, not the King. It is against me alone that you should direct your bloody fury.’

This was the excuse the Assembly deputies who advocated exonerating the
king needed. The day after the Festival of Federation, inside the Manège, they made a case for leniency, for putting the past behind and allowing Louis XVI to assume the role allotted him under the forthcoming constitution. But the Cordeliers Club was outside again, banging on the door, demanding a referendum. Robespierre and Pétion went
out to negotiate. They told the petitioners it was too late. They gave them a
discouraging letter to take back to their club: petitions like this were not a helpful
contribution; please could they stop. This letter – signed by both Robespierre
and Pétion – did not have its intended effect. Instead, it inspired the Cordeliers and
Jacobin clubs to unite behind
a new petition calling for the deposition of the king. This was drafted by Brissot in terms that cleverly avoided calling for a republic by demanding the ‘replacement of Louis XVI by constitutional means’.

Danton read the text aloud to crowds assembled on the Champ de Mars on 16 July, standing at the Altar of the Fatherland, where
General Lafayette had stood two days before to celebrate the fall of the Bastille. The same day, the deputies in the Manège voted to suspend the king, but only until he had approved the new constitution. This meant that the petition for his dethronement was now illegal, since it contravened the Assembly’s decree. Realising this, the Jacobins
rapidly withdrew their support and cancelled the printing of the petition before it left the printer’s shop. The Cordeliers were less cautious. Reassembling the following day at the Altar of the Fatherland, they drew up yet another petition, demanding the trial of the king. There was a disturbing incident early in the morning, before the crowds arrived: two men
were found hiding under the altar, assumed to be spies, and summarily hanged à la lanterne. However, since it was Sunday, many of the petitioners arrived later in the day with their wives and children, and the prevailing atmosphere that afternoon was peaceful and festive. By early evening more than six thousand people had signed the petition and the crowds
showed no sign of dispersing. At around 7 p.m., General Lafayette and mayor Bailly arrived at the Champ de Mars. They came accompanied by armed National Guards, ready to suppress the demonstration. About fifty of the signatories were shot on the steps of the altar; their blood splattered across what was left of its dedication. A matching red
mark of terror and repression appeared simultaneously above the Hôtel de Ville – the red flag of martial law was flying and the prominent revolutionaries ran for their lives.

Eighty years later, in the middle of another revolution in 1871, a fire in the Hôtel de Ville destroyed the soiled petition of 17 July 1791. Reputedly, Danton’s name
was not on it and nor was Robespierre’s. After the petition on dethronement was outlawed, Danton had had nothing to do with organising the next one. He might not even have been at the Champ de Mars that Sunday. Nonetheless, on learning that his enemy General Lafayette had taken charge of Paris, he fled to Arcis-sur-Aube (where he had been born), then to
London, where he lived in Soho on Greek Street for a month, until it was safe to return. Robespierre spent the evening of 17 July in the Jacobin Club. Hearing the news of bloodshed on the Champ de Mars, he wept unapologetically.

Let us weep for those citizens who have perished: let us weep
even for those citizens who, in good faith, were the instruments of their death. Let us in any case try to find one ground of consolation in this great disaster: let us hope that all our citizens, armed as well as unarmed, will take warning from this dire example, and
hasten to swear peace and concord by the side of these newly dug graves. 47

Was this perhaps ignoble? Given that he had supported – if not actually initiated – the idea of putting the king on trial for his flight to Varennes, why wasn’t Robespierre there among the men, women and children on
whom the National Guard opened fire? Why was he weeping at the Jacobins, instead of with the wounded at the Altar of the Fatherland? Like Danton, Robespierre had had nothing to do with the petition that had caused the bloodshed – critical of the Assembly as he was, he recognised the legal force of its decision on the king and the forthcoming constitution.
In his speech to the Jacobins it was right and responsible to point out that the National Guard were citizens too – volunteer soldiers following orders. Those who gave the orders, not those who carried them out, were the proper objects of the people’s anger.

Robespierre was speaking, as darkness fell on the Champ de Mars, to only a handful of Jacobins. Pétion
was still there and so was Pierre-Louis Rœderer (an *avocat* in the Parlement of Metz before the Revolution and afterwards a supporter of progressive reform in the National Assembly). But most of the other liberal deputies – the abbé Sieyès among them – were in the Feuillants Club, across the street, where they professed themselves more moderate
than the Jacobins, and more unequivocally committed to upholding the proposed constitutional monarchy. Suddenly there was a disturbance outside — shouting and the clash of arms in the rue Saint-Honoré. It was the National Guard returning to the city centre in shock and disarray. Some of the citizen soldiers made their way into the Jacobins
courtyard and shouted abuse at the radicals within – the radicals whom they blamed for inviting civil unrest and bringing Paris to the brink of civil war. For the first but by no means the last time, there was complete panic inside the club. Robespierre managed, somehow, to talk it down, and Mme Roland was present to hear him do it. Later that evening she sat at home
thinking about him, how terrified he had been, but also how brave, and wondered if he had managed to get safely home to the rue Saintonge ‘in the depths of the Marais’. On a daring but foolhardy whim, she decided to go and check. She persuaded her husband to go with her, and they reached Robespierre’s lodgings just before midnight, to find him still out. How surprised he
would have been to find Mme Roland on his doorstep at that hour! Robespierre, as we have seen, did not do well with women on the doorstep, and 17 July had been an unusually long and terrible day. Since he was not there, however, there was nothing Mme Roland could do except go home again with her husband and resume worrying that the leader of the Jacobins
— on whom she was developing one of her many crushes — had been arrested or worse.

In fact, he was fine. Another member of the Jacobin audience that night was a master joiner and cabinet-maker named Maurice Duplay, originally from Auvergne, but now living just doors from the Jacobins in the rue Saint-
Honoré. As Robespierre was about to leave the club that night and step out into the unruly streets, Duplay intercepted him and offered sanctuary in his home close by. Robespierre, certainly exhausted and possibly frightened too, accepted the kind offer. Duplay lived modestly in a two-storey house centred on a small courtyard in which he kept
the tools and materials of his trade. Stepping over planks of wood and a sawpit on his way in, Robespierre was greeted by Duplay’s wife and family: a son and three daughters. In this simple household he felt instantly at home. As his sister Charlotte pointed out, he had been accustomed to her own domestic ministrations in Arras. Since moving away he had lived as
a bachelor, but it did not suit him. ‘Madame Duplay and her daughters expressed towards him the most vivid interest and surrounded him with their thousand delicate concerns. He was extremely susceptible to all those sorts of things. My aunts and I had spoilt him with an abundance of the little attentions that women alone are capable of.’

Charlotte was jealous at
the very thought of the Duplay women looking after her brother. He, however, was very comfortable: close to the Jacobins, close to the Manège and living with the kind of skilled artisan whose straightforward work and home life seemed to embody the very essence of the political principles he believed in. After the massacre on the Champ de
Mars, Robespierre lodged with the Duplays almost without interruption until he died. He had found his last home.\textsuperscript{49}

The king’s flight to Varennes was tactfully forgotten, and the constitution, so long in the making, was finally finished and formally accepted by Louis XVI in
September 1791.\textsuperscript{50} A hot-air balloon, trailing tricolour ribbons, floated over the Champ de Mars announcing the fact. The gesture was suitably ephemeral, since the constitutional monarchy relied on a tenuous partnership between the king and the people’s new representatives, tied together, but no better coordinated than the ribbons flapping in the
sky. Because of the self-denying edict put forth by Robespierre, he and his fellow Assembly deputies were not eligible to stand for election to the new legislature. On the last day of the Assembly, in the atmosphere of relief and celebration overtaking Paris, Robespierre and his friend Pétion were crowned with wreaths of laurel and led
through the city streets by a jubilant crowd. People who had yet to set eyes on Robespierre went to look at his portrait by Mme Labille-Guyard, hanging in the Paris Salon. He had entered the Assembly an unknown in 1789, but now left it a popular hero – a bold spokesman for liberty and equality, the defender of the poor, an advocate of
democracy, that rare and admirable thing in politics: an incorruptible man. For the time being, however, he was not needed and could take his first holiday in over two years. Robespierre, unlike Danton, Pétion, Brissot and others whom he knew in Paris, had never been abroad. He could have gone at this point. He had enough money at last and his health, strained
by the daily grind in the Manège and the late nights at the Jacobins, might have benefited. Instead, he answered the call of family duty, and went home to Arras.

Robespierre wrote to tell his sister he was coming, and that he wanted – if at all possible – to avoid a public welcome. She treated his request with characteristic
seriousness, but could do nothing to prevent Augustin announcing their brother’s imminent return from the tribune at the local Jacobin Club. On the designated day, Charlotte and Augustin set out early in the morning to meet Maximilien, accompanied by Mme Buissart, the wife of his closest friend in Arras. They hired a coach and took the
road to Paris as far as the small town of Bapaume. But though they waited all day, their brother did not arrive. They went back to Arras that evening, very disappointed. At the city gates a crowd had assembled, having heard a rumour that the famous deputy had finally returned. As the coach pulled up, the people began detaching the horses, so as to pull it inside
the city walls themselves as a mark of respect and gratitude. Everyone was quite embarrassed when they discovered that it was only Charlotte, Augustin and Mme Buissart inside. On 14 October, the small welcome party set off again, even earlier this time, hoping to avoid attracting further attention. Camped at an inn at Bapaume, keeping out of
sight, they waited for Robespierre. Although the inn was on the road from Paris, they were afraid of missing him, so posted a lookout in the street.

Bapaume was already in a turbulent state because a battalion of National Guards from Paris, among them some of the original heroes from the fall of the Bastille, were currently garrisoned in the
town. Over the past week there had been bitter conflicts between these National Guards, full of revolutionary enthusiasm, and the locals – many of whom, as Robespierre was soon to discover, were considerably less enthusiastic. Suddenly the Incorruptible – away for over two long, eventful years – was in the arms of his nearest and dearest. Outside
the inn the lookout had spread the word. The National Guards were delighted and gathered to congratulate Robespierre on his democratic principles, his tireless fight against the enemies of the people, his outstanding political courage. They set about organising an impromptu banquet, which detained Robespierre in Bapaume for several hours,
so it was dark before he set off again with his proud siblings beside him.

At Arras there was an even bigger crowd. The people were in high spirits; they had waited excitedly all day, and some of them were probably rather inebriated by the time the coach – with Robespierre in it this time – rolled into view. Once again there was an attempt to
detach the horses at the city gate so the appreciative crowd could pull their returning hero across the city threshold. Seeing this commotion through the window, Robespierre had one of his attacks of irritation and got out immediately. He proclaimed priggishly to his brother and sister that he did not approve of free citizens taking on the role of animals
and debasing themselves in this manner – all his hard work in the Assembly had been for nothing if the people of his own home town were still so unenlightened. Undeterred by his disapproval, the crowd at Arras, now joined by the crowd that had followed the coach from Bapaume, surged through the streets towards his old home in the rue des
Rapporteurs shouting, ‘Vive Robespierre! Long live the Defender of the People!’ This was exactly what he had not wanted. He had hoped for a discreet private homecoming, fearing that any public fêteing would be reported in the Parisian press and turned against him by his growing number of political enemies. With immense relief he finally closed the front door
behind him and was alone again with his strange small family.
Part IV

The Constitution Fails

(1791–1792)
ROBESPIERRE GOT HOME on a Friday evening. By the end of
the weekend, when he wrote to the Duplays, all his irritation had been forgotten and he described his homecoming in glowing terms. ‘I was enchanted by the patriotism of the National Guard,’ he wrote. The people of Arras had received him ‘with demonstrations of such affection as I cannot express, and cannot recall without emotion’. Even his enemies,
the aristocrats, had illuminated their houses in his honour, ‘which I can only attribute to their respect for the will of the people’. (A local newspaper, however, attributed this to people’s fear of having their windows smashed.) The following day an unarmed battalion of National Guards had danced and sung patriotic songs outside his house. All of this,
he gleefully remarks, must have been very disagreeable for Feuillant ears. The split at the Paris Jacobin Club earlier in 1791 had reached Arras. Here, as in many other places throughout the country, former members of the local Jacobin Club had followed the Feuillant example and formed new, more moderate, clubs on hearing the news of the massacre on the Champ
de Mars. According to Robespierre, the Feuillants now dominated the local government, which was increasingly hostile to the people, the patriots and their Jacobin champions, including the most famous – himself. In fact, once the initial excitement of his homecoming had died down, many in Arras gave him the cold shoulder. He went to
visit one old friend, only to find him distant and completely changed. Robespierre was upset to find that the Revolution had destroyed some of his connections from his days as a member of the Academy of Arras and the Rosati literary society.

According to Charlotte, he was also upset to discover that, in his long absence,
Anais Deshorties (the stepdaughter of one of their aunts whom he had courted before the Revolution) had married another local lawyer – but if this broke his heart, there is no evidence of it in his surviving correspondence. Instead his mind was full of two political subjects: the National Guard and the Church. It was all very well to have battalions of National
Guards trooping about, singing and dancing and dressing up in their new uniforms, but were they really ready to defend the country? Some of them were not even armed, let alone trained – how could they repel an invading army? Arras was close to the frontier and Robespierre’s sense that revolutionary France was dangerously unready for war
grew stronger as he travelled around during his six-week holiday, visiting Lille, Béthune and the environs. He also noticed, on these short trips, that the roadside inns were full of émigrés. Dropping in for refreshment on his travels, he was horrified to overhear well-bred voices at the surrounding tables discussing their discontent with the
Revolution and their plans for abandoning the country. As the uncompromising defender of liberty in the Assembly, he had argued for freedom of movement – if anyone (except the king) wanted to leave the country, they must be free to do so. When he saw the émigrés for himself, however, he was disconcerted. He interrogated the innkeepers. Was this
typical? Yes, they told him, for quite some time people had been leaving in droves. His uncomfortable suspicion that the country’s borders were vulnerable and insecure became more intense. The counter-revolution was growing in strength and at Colbentz, just across the German border, the Prince de Condé was continuing to amass troops.
Equally disturbing to Robespierre was the religious resistance to the Revolution gathering strength across provincial France. In Arras he had grown up in an atmosphere pervaded by Catholicism. He owed his education to the Church; his intervention in the National Assembly in the interest of the lower clergy might have been an expression of
gratitude; and he still sometimes spoke as though residual religious belief was the bedrock of his political convictions. When he returned home to the ecclesiastical centre of Artois, he cannot have expected to find it transformed beyond recognition. What he did find, however, shocked him deeply. Months before, his brother had written to him
about the provincial clergy’s opposition to the Revolution. But in Paris, where the majority of priests had sworn to uphold the controversial Civil Constitution of the Clergy, Robespierre and his fellow radicals had little direct experience of that opposition. Not so in Arras, where there had recently been a re-enactment of the Crucifixion, with
revolutionaries cast as Roman soldiers offering vinegar to the lips of the dying Christ. Refractory priests (priests who had followed the Pope in rejecting the Civil Constitution of the Clergy) were flagrantly turning their congregations against the Revolution. Confronted now with the force of religion, Robespierre wrote to an unidentified friend in Paris:
Nearly all the orators in the National Assembly were on the left over the question of priests; they spoke rhetorically about tolerance and the liberty of sects; they saw nothing but a question of philosophy and religion in what is really a question of
revolution and politics; they did not see that every time an aristocratic priest makes a convert he makes a new enemy of the Revolution; since those ignorant people he leads astray are incapable of distinguishing religious from national interest, and
in appearing to defend religious opinions, [the priests] actually preach despotism and counter-revolution … I realise now that in Paris we very poorly understand the public spirit and the power of the priests. I am convinced that they alone would be enough to bring back
despotism, and that the court need do no more than leave it to them, confident of soon reaping the benefit of their schemes …

Robespierre’s view was not so different from that of the Revolution’s most articulate foreign critic, the conservative philosopher and
politician Edmund Burke, who thought that the counter-revolution could rely on the priests to establish ‘peace and order in every parish’. Burke’s great hope was Robespierre’s worst nightmare. To his surprise and irritation, this opinion, expressed in a private letter, was published the following week in not one but two Parisian newspapers –
whoever Robespierre’s friend was, he or she had betrayed him. From Arras he wrote at once to the editors to complain at the infringement of his privacy, but he made no attempt whatsoever to disown the opinion itself.\textsuperscript{4}

In a letter to Maurice Duplay – a more reliable friend – Robespierre described another recent religious sensation in Arras.
A refractory priest was celebrating Mass in the Chapel of Calvary when a crippled man in the congregation suddenly threw down his crutches and walked freely. The man’s wife fainted when she heard the astounding news and gave thanks to heaven for the miracle, after she had recovered consciousness. Interestingly, Robespierre
does not flatly reject the concept of a miracle, as Mirabeau and other determinedly secular revolutionaries certainly would have done, often with ribaldry. Instead, he comments that it is not so surprising that a miracle should have taken place in that particular chapel, since others had occurred there in the past. There is perhaps a
note of sarcasm in his next remark: ‘I do not propose to stay long in this holy land,’ he tells his carpenter friend, ‘I am not worthy of it.’ But this is not the letter of someone who simply sneers at religion. His provincial holiday had served to remind Robespierre of religion’s immense social power. Before the holiday was over, he concluded that the Revolution must harness
the Church for its own purposes or risk destruction. At the very end of his letter, he sends his greetings to Georges Couthon, another of Dupleix’s Jacobin lodgers and a prominent member of the circle of friends that now surrounded Robespierre in Paris. In Arras, he was homesick for that circle.
Robespierre returned to Paris on 28 November. He went first to the Duplays’, deposited his meagre luggage, and refreshed himself in his low-ceilinged timber-framed bedroom that looked out over the carpenter’s yard. Later that evening, he went to dine with Pétion. There had been some big changes in Pétion’s life since Robespierre last saw
him. He had been elected mayor of Paris in the recent municipal elections, receiving 6,728 votes to General Lafayette’s 3,126. About seventy thousand people who were eligible to vote abstained, and a hundred voted for Robespierre even though he wasn’t a candidate: flattering or frustrating, depending on how he looked at it. Dinner *chez* Pétion was
a much grander affair than it had been on the day after the king’s flight to Varennes. As mayor, Pétion was now living in a magnificent Parisian house, ‘but his spirit is as simple and pure as ever’, Robespierre reassured himself nervously. He spoke freely in a letter to Buissart of the new configuration of power in Paris: Pétion had taken on an exacting role, but
his personal virtue and love of the people equipped him well for it; the recently elected Legislative Assembly, according to Robespierre, was full of promise and a real improvement on its predecessor in the Manège; public opinion was turning against the Feuillants, among them Barnave, who had befriended the king on the difficult journey back from
Varennes; and people were rightly suspicious of the king’s Feuillant ministers. These ministers were royalists: men Louis XVI thought he could trust to bolster his own precarious constitutional role, among them the Comte de Montmorin (the foreign affairs minister, who soon resigned) and the Comte de Narbonne (war minister).
Popular opinion was increasingly hostile toward the monarch and concerned that he might try to reassert his power and strengthen his position under the new constitution. However, on arriving back in the capital, Robespierre’s first impression was that things looked good for the patriotic party.

Despite his long day travelling, before dining with
Pétion Robespierre visited the Jacobin Club. Here he was greeted with rapturous applause. No sooner had he stepped back into the old monastery than the Jacobins made him their president: he had truly come home. The following evening one of the club members raised the matter of confession – surely this Catholic sacrament was dangerous and should be
discouraged? Robespierre, fresh from Arras, disagreed – it was pointless attacking religious customs beloved by the people, he warned his fellow Jacobins. Better to hope that over time the people would mature and abandon such prejudices. In the meantime, the club should stick to discussing issues raised by the Legislative Assembly, just as it had
followed the National Assembly in the past. In this way it was sure to focus on urgently relevant business. And nothing, Robespierre insisted, was more relevant than the threat of war. He was far from alone in worrying about the émigrés at the frontier. Rumours of war, of a royal plot to restore despotism, were circulating wildly. Louis XVI appeared
before the Assembly on 14 December and promised to send 150,000 French troops to protect the frontier within a month. But secretly, he had already written to the major European powers requesting their armed intervention to save his throne. Robespierre did not know this for certain, but he suspected as much, and ended the year 1791 as the de facto leader of an anti-
war campaign.

Brissot, who, unlike Robespierre and Pétion, had been eligible for election to the new legislative body (never having been an official member of its predecessor), was the leader of the pro-war party. He had not attended a Jacobin meeting for several months; when he suddenly decided to go and confront Robespierre on his own
territory. On the night of 16 December, having set the case for war before the Assembly earlier in the day, Brissot told the Jacobins that only war could save the Revolution and stop France from becoming a plaything for Europe’s tyrants. War, as he saw it, would consolidate the Revolution in France by carrying it into foreign countries in the wake of an
invading army. Robespierre intervened to prevent Brissot’s speech being printed and circulated to the affiliated clubs until he had had a chance to reply.\textsuperscript{8} Two days later he harangued the Jacobins with his twenty-page response:

\begin{quote}
Is this the war of a nation against other nations, or a king
against other kings? No. It is a war of the enemies of the French Revolution against the French Revolution. Are the most numerous and dangerous of these enemies at Coblentz [the headquarters of émigré forces]? No, they are among us … War is always the first
desire of a powerful government that wants to become more powerful ... Let us calmly assess our situation: the nation is divided into three parts; aristocrats; patriots; and the hypocritical in-between party, known as ministers.⁹
On and on he went, insisting that France was teetering on the brink of a foreign, civil and religious war, all equally menacing to the Revolution. The king and his Feuillant ministers must not be trusted. But always it was the hidden enemy – the enemy within – that preoccupied Robespierre. Turning on Brissot, he asked what security he could offer
against such alarming dangers. None. ‘Mistrust is a shameful state,’ Brissot had argued. Now Robespierre rebuffed him: mistrust was a good deal less shameful than ‘the stupid confidence’ (a phrase borrowed from Danton) that might lead the nation over the edge of a precipice. ‘Patriot legislators, do not slander mistrust,’ he warned Brissot and the rest of
the Assembly. Finally, mindful of what he had seen in and around Arras, he pointed out that in any event France could not go to war until it was ready: weapons would need to be manufactured, the National Guard would have to be properly armed, the people themselves would need to be armed too, albeit only with pikes. All of this was a direct
development of Robespierre’s earlier speech on the National Guard. Now, as then, he drew on the idea of a democratic war, waged exclusively in the general interest by the whole people in arms. The war that, for different reasons, Brissot, the king and his ministers were all proposing could not have been more different.

Mutual friends at the Jacobin Club effected a
personal reconciliation between Robespierre and Brissot early in the New Year, but no one could reconcile their positions on war. ‘I shall continue to oppose Brissot’s views whenever they seem contrary to my principles,’ Robespierre announced. ‘Let our union rest upon the holy basis of patriotism and virtue; and let us fight as free men,
with frankness and, if necessary, determination, but also with respect for friendship and each other.’

And this was exactly what he did when, against all his warnings, the Assembly approved the first ultimatum to Marie Antoinette’s brother, the Holy Roman emperor Leopold II. The ultimatum demanded that Leopold disassociate himself from the
counter-revolutionary émigrés and all European powers hostile to the Revolution. If, by 1 March, he had still not publicly declared his support for France, war would ensue. Snapping straight into his Nostradamus mode, Robespierre prophesied to the Jacobins:

Ah! I can see a great
crowd of people dancing in an open plain covered with grass and flowers, making play with their weapons, and filling the air with shouts of joy, and songs of war. Suddenly the ground sinks beneath their feet, the flowers, the men, the weapons disappear; and I can
see nothing but a gaping chasm filled with victims. Ah! Fly! Fly, while there is still time, before the ground on which you stand opens beneath its covering of flowers.\textsuperscript{12}

Marat himself could have no found more powerful images for an audience still reeling
from the shock of the massacre on the Champ de Mars.

The build-up to war accentuated the division at the Jacobin Club between Robespierre and Brissot. Robespierre had to struggle hard to secure his ascendancy over what was now his only power base. He tried to
close the club’s doors, arguing against the admission of new members, or even the readmission of old members who had left but wanted to come back. He proposed posting a list of members up on the club wall, along with their addresses, current occupations and status prior to the Revolution. This would discourage people from claiming to be Jacobins when
they were not (or were no longer), and would help keep track of the membership.\textsuperscript{14} But he failed to gain control of the club’s Correspondence Committee, which, as he astutely recognised, was the link between the Parisian Jacobins and their thousands of associated clubs throughout the country.\textsuperscript{15} In February it came to light that the Correspondence
Committee, dominated by Brissot’s faction, was on the point of sending a pro-war circular to affiliated clubs throughout France, without consulting the Parisian club in its entirety. Then, on 10 February, Robespierre set out before the club his own vision of a war of defence, still hoping to sway the Parisian Jacobins against the war of conquest advocated by
Brissot. Robespierre began characteristically. ‘I am going to propose means of saving the fatherland, that is to say, stifling the civil war and the foreign war by confounding the schemes of our internal enemies.’

What followed was an outpouring of his obsessions at this crucial juncture in the Revolution — many he returned to, with far more
power at his disposal, two years later. They fell into two categories: internal treason, and obstacles to the free expression of public spirit. Again he raised the question of arming the National Guard and the people themselves. The king’s war minister had suggested recruiting men into the ranks of the National Guard for the professional army. Treason, warned
Robespierre. This was nothing less than a proposal to annihilate the National Guard, the very opposite of arming it properly in the defence of the people. He reminded the Jacobins of how, over a year ago, he had cautioned the National Assembly against letting the king retain the right to declare war. The deputies had only half listened to him, so now
the new Legislative Assembly was paying the price of not being free to make decisions independently of the king and his untrustworthy ministry. To remedy the situation, he called for weapons inspections in all the municipalities, in the presence of the people, so everyone would know exactly what there was to defend the nation with. These weapons
should then be distributed to National Guards throughout France, beginning with the battalions at the frontier with the Austrian Netherlands, since some, as he had seen for himself in Arras, were still unarmed.

The next step, as he saw it, was to arm the people:

I demand the manufacture of pikes,
and that the [Legislative] Assembly commend this almost sacred weapon to the people and exhort them to never forget the important role it has played in our revolution; and I propose that it [the Assembly] summon all citizens to the
defence of the state and liberty, and efface all the injurious and impolitic distinctions that divide them. 17

Beyond this, he called for the electoral colleges of the forty-eight Paris sections to go into permanent, that is daily, session. Perpetual vigilance was required to save the state, he insisted, and only the
sections could provide it. Here again, Robespierre echoed a speech he had given in 1790 in support of Danton; now as then he wanted to see ‘a tight and holy’ alliance between the people and their representatives. But this was not enough. ‘Do you want to invigorate and regenerate the whole state in an instant?’ he asked his amazed audience. This, he thought, could be
achieved by organising a new Festival of Federation, on the model of the original one, which had commemorated the first anniversary of the fall of the Bastille. Let National Guards all over France freely elect delegations and send them to Paris for 1 March. There, in a patriotic and fraternal festival, they could renew their commitment to the admirable principle
‘Liberty or Death!’ They could offer a symbolic sacrifice on the altar of liberty and appease the spirits of the virtuous citizens.

In the middle of this speech – playing dangerously on religious imagery and the memory of earlier revolutionary scenes on the Champ de Mars – Robespierre called upon his friend Pétion to officiate at
this new festival:

O Pétion! You are worthy of this honour, worthy of deploying as much energy as wisdom in the dangers that menace the fatherland which we have defended together. Come, on the tombs of our brothers let us mingle
our tears and weapons, remind ourselves of the pleasures of celestial virtue, and die tomorrow, if need be, from the blows of our common enemies.  

He called too on the members of the Legislative Assembly to join in this festival that he imagined so vividly. Let them
come to the Champ de Mars, not as their predecessors had done, overshadowed by the corrupt pomp of an arrogant court (Robespierre remembered how he had sat in the pavilion behind the king on 14 July 1790), but proudly inspired by ‘all the majesty of the people and the simplicity of civic virtue’. This indeed would be proof that the France of 14 July still
lived.

After this rhetorical climax, Robespierre returned to the causes of the current crisis in foreign policy. He pointed out that the National Assembly (against his advice) had misjudged the political situation and given too much credence to the king and his ministers. It had, for example, approved of General Bouillé’s brutal repression of
the rebellious soldiers in Nancy. On this, as on so many other occasions, it had been led disastrously astray. The new Legislative Assembly must do better, must remember that it was in the middle of a revolution, surrounded by traitors wearing masks of patriotism, and must remain ever vigilant and critical of the advice it received. To this end, he
proposed that a new hall to house the Assembly be built on the site of the razed Bastille. Things would never have gone so catastrophically wrong if in Paris, as in Versailles, the Assembly had met in a hall big enough to admit large numbers of the general public. The restricted spectator space at the Manège had led to treasonous decisions – like the
declaration of martial law that gave rise to the massacre on the Champ de Mars – that would never have been made in the presence of the people. The hall Robespierre envisaged would hold at least ten thousand spectators, and he thought it could be built quickly if as much energy and determination went into the project as had gone into the building of opera houses
under the Old Regime. (In this way, he anticipated by two hundred years the televising of parliaments in the democratic world.)

Finally, he came to the subject of education, obviously extremely important given the prominent role he envisaged for the people. He favoured a centralised national system of pedagogy, which a number of
other revolutionaries had already advocated. But for his purposes in this speech he outlined only a small number of simple ideas for rapidly propagating the principles of the Revolution. Unsurprisingly, after what he had already said, national festivals topped his list of suggestions. He also wanted to see the theatres used in the service of the Revolution:
plays, like *Brutus*, *William Tell* and *Gracchus* that depicted the charms of virtue and wonders of liberty would be edifying entertainments for the people. Nurtured in this way, Robespierre was convinced – or said he was convinced – that public spirit would soon converge with the true principles of the Revolution and resolve the problems menacing France.
When it came to patriotism, the Paris sections made better judges than the academics in the Académie Française, better judges, too, than the administrators in the department of Paris. In making this unabashed populist argument, Robespierre, as so often, was following Rousseau, who had claimed in the *Social Contract* that all men and
groups in positions of power have an interest apart from that of the people. With Rousseau in mind, he argued that the people alone are good: ‘the spirit of the people is good, and it alone renders justice to its friends and its enemies’.  

As Robespierre stepped down from the tribune after this remarkable speech, he was applauded as rapturously
as on his return from Arras. He had found his public persona and hit his political stride. This was obvious even to a foreign visitor in Paris. The political writer and composer of comic operas, William Augustus Miles, wrote of Robespierre to the British poet laureate Henry James Pye:

He is a stern man,
rigid in his principles, plain, unaffected in his manners, no foppery in his dress, certainly above corruption, despising wealth, and with nothing of the volatility of a Frenchman in his character … I watch him very closely [at the Jacobins] every
night. I read his countenance with eyes steadily fixed on him. He is really a character to be contemplated; he is growing every hour into consequence.\textsuperscript{22}

The Jacobins acclaimed Robespierre the hero of the Revolution, and, as was now customary in their club, they
proposed to print and circulate his speech to their affiliated clubs and to the Paris sections (which would, of course, be very gratified by it). However, as so often before, this seminal speech that contained in embryo Robespierre’s core themes – his suspicion of internal enemies, his trust in the people – had little impact at the time. In January the
Jacobin Club had sent a circular to all its affiliates claiming that war was inevitable. Even Danton, who like Robespierre was opposed, said: ‘If anyone were to ask me, “Are we to have war?” I would reply (not in argument, but as a matter of fact), “We shall hear the bugles.”’

After Robespierre’s speech in February there was another
club circular announcing that the majority of the Parisian Jacobins strongly favoured war. And in March the king gave in to the attacks on his ministers (who were suspected of trying to turn the imminent war to the advantage of the counter-revolution), dismissed them, and appointed instead friends and associates of Brissot’s, among them Mme Roland’s
husband, who became Minister of the Interior, Étienne Clavière, a Genevan financier and journalist, now Minister for Finance, and Joseph Servan, Minister for War. Suddenly Brissot was at the centre of a sphere of political influence undreamed of by anyone since Mirabeau, ranging across the Jacobins, the Legislative Assembly and the executive power. His war-
mongering had proved popular with those who resented the émigrés, feared foreign invasion and suspected the king’s commitment to the Revolution. Brissot was emerging as the leading advocate of a republic in France. All eyes were upon him – none more warily than Robespierre’s.
Ever since the Revolution began, Robespierre had been suspicious of the king’s ministers, whoever they happened to be, because they were entrusted with executive power and potentially corrupt. Even Necker, whom Robespierre eulogised before 1789, became a target for his attacks afterwards. Now that Brissot’s friends – Roland, Clavière, Servan – were
ministers, executive power was, for the first time, in the hands of people Robespierre knew personally. Predictably, this only aggravated his hostility. Sneeringly he criticised Brissot, who had used his influence in the Assembly to help his friends to power: ‘You have got rid of certain old ministers, but you have filled their places with your own friends. It
must be confessed that your patriotism is not without its little consolations. All the world sees the publicity – the ridiculous ostentation – with which you dispose of all the offices and employments in the country among your own creatures.’

The Incorruptible could not tolerate such nepotism. Now, on top of his ideological differences with
Brissot over the putative war, there was open personal contempt. In the circumstances, his relationship with Mme Roland also deteriorated sharply. After he returned from Arras she was as effusive and solicitous towards him as ever, but very soon even she could not ignore the distance that had developed between
Robespierre and the circle of radicals she presided over so proudly. Now that she was the wife of the Minister of the Interior, she was prouder still:

When my husband was at the ministry I made it a rule not to make or to receive social calls and not to invite any women to meals ... twice a week
I invited to dinner ministers, deputies and others with whom my husband needed to be on good terms. They always talked business in front of me because I did not interrupt and was not surrounded by indiscreet friends … Thus without any need for intrigue or
unseemly curiosity I found myself at the centre of affairs. 25

Mme Roland wrote to Robespierre almost ordering him to come and see her so she could pick his brains and decide how to use her supposedly discreet influence: ‘You are at the head of my list. So please come at once. I am eager to
see you, and to tell you again of my regard for you – a regard that nothing can alter.’ If he went, he went only warily, and the decline in their friendship continued. Pétion tried to act as a peacemaker. But it would not be long before Robespierre – who had only recently imagined standing by Pétion’s side, pledging Liberty or Death on the
Champ de Mars, fell out with him too. Here began a period of political isolation which Robespierre, determined as always never to compromise his principles, relished. He had no formal power of any kind, except his legal office as Public Prosecutor, which he resigned on 10 April, along with its steady income of 8,000 livres a year.

All his energy now went
into the Jacobin Club, whose support he needed more than ever. In his isolation he identified yet more closely with Rousseau. When Brissot returned to the club to try once again to defeat Robespierre on the question of war, Robespierre retorted that the only legitimate charge ever levied against him was that he had championed the cause of the
people by opposing a war that he thought would lead to the defeat of the Revolution at home and abroad. He was proud to admit this charge. From his experience of public life so far he had learnt for himself ‘the great moral and political truth announced by Jean-Jacques [Rousseau], that men are sincerely fond only of those who show them affection; that only the people
are good, just and generous; and that corruption and tyranny are the monopoly of those who hold them in disdain’. Robespierre claimed to be happy in his isolation, happy even to retire from politics (at this some of the women in his audience gasped), so long as he could remain true to his principles and free to worship the ‘sacred image of Jean-
Jacques’. ‘But where would you have me retire?’ he asks his fellow Jacobins. What despotic regime would offer him asylum, and how could he leave France with liberty under attack?

No! One might abandon one’s country in the hour of happiness and triumph; but when it
is threatened, when it is torn asunder, when it is oppressed, one cannot do so; one must either save it, or die for it. Heaven that gave me a soul passionately fond of liberty, and yet ordained that I should be born under the domination of tyrants; Heaven, which
prolonged my existence up to the reign of faction and of crime, is perhaps calling me to mark with my blood the road that leads my native land to happiness and freedom. I accept with enthusiasm this sweet and glorious destiny. 

28
It was this peculiar combination of acute political suspicion and personal animosity towards anyone who disagreed with him which carried Robespierre to his lonely and eccentric destination in the Revolution. Tellingly, he quoted directly a politically pregnant phrase of Rousseau’s: \textit{le peuple veut le bien, mais il ne le voit pas toujours} (the people want
what is good, but they do not always see it). Robespierre was very sure of himself as an astute interpreter of what was, or was not, in the interests of the people. And so those whose opinions differed from his were instantly suspect.

On 11 April a member of the Jacobins described a recent invention: a new kind of rifle that could fire twenty-
five rounds a minute. Should the club help fund experiments to perfect it? Absolutely not, said Robespierre, such an invention was contrary to humanitarian principles. He said that some time towards the end of the National Assembly, he had seen this rifle demonstrated in the garden of the house he was then living in. It could shoot
nine rounds without needing to be recharged. The inventor had asked his opinion, and Robespierre had told him to keep silent about it – such a discovery in the hands of a free people might give them a momentary advantage over despots, but the weapon would soon pass into the hands of the despots and become just one more instrument for oppressing the
people (a very pertinent and prescient point for all revolutionaries). The majority of the Jacobins, however, were not convinced. The atmosphere in Paris grew more bellicose by the day.

The tide of public opinion ran against him, the Jacobins could not be swayed against the war, but Robespierre refused to back down. He feared that war could only
damage the Revolution. If France lost, foreign enemies would crush the Revolution and re-establish a despotic form of government to suit their own interests. But if France won, Robespierre thought internal enemies, in league with the king and the victorious army generals, were just as likely to destroy the Revolution. General Lafayette was particularly
untrustworthy, in Robespierre’s view. Lafayette had retired from public life after the king formally accepted the constitution in 1791. However, with war imminent, he had been recalled to command one of the three armies the French had now positioned on the frontier to attack the émigré forces and Austria, if necessary.
thought the ambitious veteran of the American Revolution was secretly hoping to lead France to victory, only to perpetrate a military coup and seize power afterwards. There was no similarity, Robespierre insisted, between the American War of Independence and the war France was about to become embroiled in. When the Americans fought against
foreign despotism, they did not have internal enemies to fight simultaneously. Arguing that the Americans had triumphed (not without cost) over a despot who made open war on them, Robespierre asked if they would still have triumphed if generals loyal to their enemy, George III, had been leading them.  

On 1 March, the very day named in the French
ultimatum he had received, the queen’s brother, the Holy Roman emperor Leopold II, suddenly died. Robespierre publicly thanked Providence for averting the war in this unexpected way. The Jacobins were astonished. As one of them blurted out, how could someone who had worked for three years to liberate the people subscribe to such superstitious nonsense
as a belief in Providence? Instead of letting this pass and confining himself to the debate about the international crisis, Robespierre veered off into a vehement profession of religious faith. Perhaps he could not stop himself, or perhaps he saw no reason not to:

There is nothing superstitious in using
the name of the Deity. I believe, myself, in those eternal principles on which human weakness reposes, before it starts on the path of virtue. These are not idle words in my mouth, any more than they have been idle words in the mouths of many great men,
nonetheless moral for their belief in the existence of God.\textsuperscript{31}

This caused uproar in the old monastery chapel. Robespierre shouted over it:

No, gentlemen! You cannot stifle my voice. There is no call to order that can stifle this truth … Yes, it is
hazardous to invoke the name of Providence, and express the idea of the Eternal Being who intimately affects the destinies of nations, and who seems to me personally to watch over the French Revolution in a very special way. But my belief is heartfelt; it is
a feeling I cannot dispense with. I needed it to sustain me in the National Assembly, surrounded by all those passions, vile intrigues, and so many enemies. How could I have carried out my tasks that required superhuman strength, if I had not nurtured my isolated
soul? … This divine sentiment has more than compensated me for the advantages that are gained by those who are prepared to betray the people.  

With that the meeting ended. Four days later, Robespierre withdrew his proposal to circulate another controversial address to the
affiliated clubs on regenerating the public spirit. For the moment nothing was more important than harmony among the Jacobins, he claimed, in bad faith since he had purposefully exacerbated division in the club with his anti-war efforts. But he knew his latest speech had gone too far. ‘M. Robespierrot [sic] is completely out of favour,
dépopularisé. He had the audacity to say in the middle of the Jacobins, that he believes in the existence of God,’ one newspaper reported.\textsuperscript{33}

Another cause of Robespierre’s political isolation, according to Fréron, one of his former schoolmates, was the Duplay...
household. ‘It is perhaps to this change of residence that one should attribute the development of his ambition. Whilst he lived [in the rue Saintonge] ... he was accessible to his friends and to any patriot. Once installed at the Duplays’, little by little he became invisible. They sequestered him from society, adored, intoxicated, ruined him by exalting his pride.’
The family at number 366, rue Saint-Honoré consisted of Duplay, his wife, three of their four daughters, a son and a nephew. Although he was a joiner and cabinet-maker by trade, Duplay’s real income came from renting the houses he had bought after moving to the capital from Vézelay. Since the Revolution, his preferred tenants had been Jacobins. By
the time they came to know Robespierre, Duplay and his wife were middle-aged, settled, hospitable people with strong political views and a wide circle of acquaintance that included the artists François Gérard and Pierre Paul Prudhon, the sculptor Pierre Cietty and the musician Philippe Buonarroti. It is not credible that Robespierre was less
accessible living at the heart of the Duplay household, just doors away from the Jacobins and round the corner from the Manège and the Tuileries palace, than he had been when he lived all the way out in the Marais. However, it must have been more difficult for anyone to see him alone. His visitors could reach his rooms by narrow ladder-like stairs from the family dining
room, or by an external staircase in the yard – something like a modern fire escape. Those who chose the latter could avoid the scrutiny of the assembled company – Buonarroti on the piano if there was one, the Duplay daughters playing with Robespierre’s dog Brount, Duplay himself holding forth on the day’s political developments. But footsteps
and raised voices would be overheard downstairs through the timber floor. Real privacy was impossible at number 366, where even the blue and white damask curtains around Robespierre’s bed had been made from one of Mme Duplay’s old dresses.

Since Robespierre often took their part when their mother was cross with them (an extension, perhaps, of his
political insistence on championing the weak and vulnerable), the Duplay daughters were soon extremely fond of him. The youngest, Élisabeth, recalled: ‘I was very young, and rather silly; but he gave me such good advice that, young as I was, I enjoyed listening to him. If I was upset about anything, I used to tell him all about it. He was never
censorious, but a friend, the best brother a girl could have, a model of virtue. He had a great regard for my father and mother, and we all loved him dearly.’

Her elder sister Eléonore – plain, dark-haired and serious – had more romantic feelings for the famous lodger. According to the family doctor, Souberbielle – who was in a better position than anyone
else to know the household’s private business – her feelings were reciprocated. Eléonore and Robespierre were, he remembers, ‘very fond of each other and they were engaged to be married, but nothing immodest passed between them. Without affectation or prudery, Robespierre kept out of, and even put a stop to, any kind of improper talk; and his
morals were pure.’

Although doctors, for all their privileged access to information, are often far from reliable, Souberbielle’s testimony seems credible, because even if Robespierre was the kind of man to get himself into trouble with a mistress in the Marais, he was hardly the kind to carry on an indiscreet affair with a young girl under her father’s own
roof. He was neither deeply jaded nor helplessly promiscuous – if anything he was rather romantic – and the idea that he and Eléonore should wait until his public commitments were less exacting would have held a deep appeal. ‘She had the soul of a man, and would have known how to die as well as she knew how to love,’ he boasted of his
Despite the division over the war tearing them apart in the spring of 1792, the Jacobins united to celebrate the return of the freed Châteauvieux soldiers, so controversially condemned to the galleys for their mutiny in Nancy. After serving less than two years of their life sentences of hard
labour, these mutineers were now officially pardoned and received in Paris as heroes, their broken shackles badges of honour. At first, the Assembly hesitated to receive the returning mutineers. The constitution, very reasonably, banned armed men from entering the legislative chamber. But on this occasion the Assembly broke the rule and the ex-convicts marched
through the Manège, accompanied by a detachment of National Guards with drums, flags, banners and weapons, to the resounding applause of the Jacobin deputies, in agreement for the first time in months. After the soldiers came a mob of men and women brandishing pikes – some of the thousands that had recently been manufactured in accordance
with Robespierre’s demands. Over in the Hôtel de Ville, the municipal government decreed a national festival in honour of the Châteauvieux soldiers – exactly the sort of occasion that Robespierre hoped would regenerate the public spirit and propagate revolutionary principles.

On Sunday 15 April, an excited crowd paraded through Paris pulling a galley
wreathed with flowers. With it came women carrying the broken shackles high for everyone to see; then forty-one placards bearing the names of the ex-convicts, each adorned with a civic crown of oak leaves (a symbol of patriotism inspired by Ancient Rome); and busts of Voltaire, Rousseau, Benjamin Franklin and the seventeenth-century English
republican Algernon Sidney – all prophets of freedom in the eyes of the patriots. Finally there came a float carrying a statue of liberty, brandishing, somewhat incongruously, an enormous club. Surrounded by a moving forest of pikes, the parade made ceremonial stops at the site of the demolished Bastille, the Hôtel de Ville, the Champ de Mars, etc.: the ceremony was
strangely similar to the Stations of the Cross that had been performed the previous week throughout France. The crowd sang revolutionary hymns. Some proudly identified themselves as ‘sans-culottes’: ordinary working people, patriots without fine clothes (literally without the *culottes*, or knee breeches, of the wealthier classes). Pétion officiated in
his capacity as mayor of Paris. He did not, however, wield the kind of control General Lafayette on his white charger had previously extended at festivals commemorating the fall of the Bastille. This was a popular demonstration, not a disciplined military parade from which the people were carefully excluded. According to some hostile
reports, it was a rather debauched affair. The girls carrying broken shackles had been recruited from among the prostitutes in the Palais Royal gardens, not all the songs were pious revolutionary hymns, and there was apparently some louche dancing as well. But if there was, the Incorruptible did not notice, or turned a blind eye. The press
described the event as ‘Robespierre’s Festival’, but it is hard to know whether he was really pleased with it. Afterwards he proposed a monument of commemoration with the inscription: ‘The Triumph of Poverty and the People, the National Guard, the soldiers of Châteauvieux, and all good citizens persecuted on account of the Revolution.’
Three days later, the king’s sister wrote from the Tuileries palace to her friend the Marquise de Raigecourt:

You think perhaps we are still in the agitation of the festival of Châteauvieux; not at all; everything is very tranquil. The people flocked to see Dame
Liberty tottering on her triumphal car, but they shrugged their shoulders. Three or four hundred sansculottes followed her shouting: ‘The Nation! Liberty! The Sans-Culottes!’ It was all very noisy, but flat. The National Guards would not mingle; on the contrary, they
were angry, and Pétion, they say, is ashamed of his conduct. The next day a pike with a *bonnet rouge* walked about the [Tuileries] garden, without shouting, and did not stay long.\textsuperscript{38}

Mme Élisabeth was not alone in finding the festival absurd, and there was some
truth in the rumours she had heard about the ambivalence with which the National Guards and Pétion participated. On 20 April, France finally declared war on Leopold II’s son and successor as Holy Roman emperor, Francis II. (Prussia joined in on Austria’s side in June.) Pétion immediately wrote to Robespierre imploring him to repair the
divisions at the Jacobins that had been caused – Pétion dared suggest it – by his friend’s frustrated ambition and petty jealousy of those in power: ‘We have lost the quiet energy of free men. We no longer judge things coolly. We shout like children or lunatics. I simply tremble when I consider how we are behaving, and I ask myself every moment whether we
can continue to be free. I cannot sleep at night, for my usual peaceful slumbers are disturbed by dreams of disaster.’

Robespierre did not reply.

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Nature gave me a strong frame, and she put into my face the violence of liberty. I have not sprung from
a family that was weakened by the protection of the old privileges; my existence has been all my own; I know that I have kept and shown my vigour, but in my profession and in my private life I have controlled it ... I consecrated my whole life to the people, and
now that they are beyond attack, now that they are in arms and ready to break the league [of foreign powers] unless it consents to dissolve, I will die in their cause if I must ... for I love them only, and they deserve it. Their courage will make them eternal. 40
This was not Robespierre speaking, but Danton, who had returned from London as soon as it seemed safe after the Champ de Mars massacre. Their physiques aside – Robespierre’s slight frame, Danton’s burly one – the two men had a great deal in common. Both were dedicated to the people, above all. Both were operating outside the
Legislative Assembly and extremely active in the Jacobins (Danton was also still prominent at the Cordeliers and had an administrative post in Paris’s municipal government). Both were against the war; convinced the country was unprepared, suspicious of the king, and afraid the forces of counter-revolution would triumph with a foreign
invasion. Their suspicions were soon justified: after the fighting began at the border, the distressing dispatches which reached Paris, each more alarming than the last, made it clear that the war was not going well and the Revolution was hanging in the balance. Within two weeks the French generals had lost control – French soldiers actually murdered
one of them – officers absconded and the enemy captured entire regiments.

The Jacobins – frightened, angry, hysterical – laid into one another. Their internecine fighting figured so prominently in the press that a letter arrived from the front deploring these distracting divisions at a time of national crisis. It was duly hissed in the club. The
personal attacks continued. One newspaper held Robespierre single-handedly responsible for the private vendettas and endless denunciations: ‘M. Robespierre [sic] resigned his position as Public Prosecutor to prove, as he said himself, that he is not ambitious. Does this not prove, on the contrary, that he is devoured by an
On 10 May another letter from the front arrived, accusing Robespierre of sullying the tribune at the Jacobins by attacking General Lafayette. Despite fierce dispute and many disruptions, the letter was read aloud. Afterwards, Robespierre went up to the tribune and snatched it from the hands of the man who had just read it. Chaos
broke out again. On another occasion a Jacobin named Jean Baptiste Louvet, the licentious novelist and poetically gifted son of a Parisian stationery shop owner, accused Robespierre of tyrannising the club. Danton stepped forward to defend him: ‘M. Robespierre has never used any tyranny in this House, unless it is the tyranny of reason: it is not
patriotism, but base jealousy and all the most harmful passions that inspire the attacks against him. But not even Danton could deny that his friend was always ready with a vicious counter-attack.

In the midst of this rancorous strife Robespierre decided to start his own journal. Despite being passionate and opinionated, he was not, in many respects,
a natural journalist. Even more long-winded on the page, his speeches seemed far flatter – almost pedantic – in print. But it was relatively easy to venture into journalism at this time, even with little natural talent; all you needed was a bit of funding and enough stamina to write a couple of thousand words a week. From the middle of May, *Le Défenseur*
de la Constitution (The Defender of the Constitution) appeared every Tuesday in an eye-catching red paper cover. The issues were undated – very peculiar for a journal or newspaper nowadays, but commonplace at the time. Despite its conservative sounding title (since when had Robespierre been the defender of a constitution he never ceased to criticise
during its drafting in the National Assembly?) what he really wanted was another platform from which to attack Brissot and anyone else who disagreed with him over the course of the Revolution. Readers could subscribe for 36 livres a year and were welcome to send in comments or books for review. Initially, the printer was to be another of Duplay’s
lodgers – an artisan from that close circle devoted to the Incorruptible. But then Robespierre came to a new arrangement with a printer and bookseller in the rue de l’Ancienne Comédie Française, who promised to get the journal into every post office in France and all the major bookshops of Europe.

There was something implausible about
Robespierre’s prospectus for the journal. His pen, he professes, will be directed only by his love of justice and truth. He will descend from the tribune and ‘mount the platform of the universe to speak not only to an Assembly, which might be agitated by the clash of different interests, but to the whole human race, whose interest is that of reason and
general happiness’. He will be like an actor who, leaving the stage and positioning himself in the audience, is better able to judge the play. He will be like a traveller who flees the tumultuous metropolis – or, in his case, revolutionary politics – and climbs to the summit of a mountain so as to feel ‘the calm of nature sink into his soul, and his thoughts
broaden out with the horizon’. So Le Défenseur de la Constitution would be nothing like Marat’s or Desmoulins’ or Brissot’s or Louvet’s publications: no, Robespierre’s was to be modelled on the Sermon on the Mount with romantic overtures. Predictably enough, he promised to use it to unmask the enemies of the people: ‘Placed since the
beginning of the Revolution at the centre of political happenings, I have had a close view of the tortuous advance of tyranny; I have discovered that our most dangerous enemies are not those who have openly declared themselves; and I shall try to render my knowledge of value for the safety of my country.’ For all the declared purity of the
journal’s manifesto, it was really a weapon in a factional fight that Robespierre had no intention of relinquishing.

Brissot and his friends were now openly calling for a republic. In his fight against them, Robespierre went so far as to turn himself into the last defender of the constitutional monarchy. Recognising that, for the time being, Brissot and his friends had made the
campaign for a republic in France their own, Robespierre dared to criticise republicanism itself: ‘I care no more for Cromwell than for Charles I,’ he announced flamboyantly. ‘Surely it is not in the words “monarchy” or “republic” that we shall find the solution to the great problems of society.’

Brissot had recently started a journal entitled *Le*
Républicain (The Republican). There was nothing, Robespierre insisted in the first issue of his own journal, truly populist about Brissot’s new venture except its title. Furthermore, he argued, the very word ‘republic’ had recently caused division among the patriots and given the enemies of liberty an excuse for claiming that there was a conspiracy
afoot against the monarchy and the constitution. Indeed, in Brissot’s hands, the word ‘republic’ had led directly to the massacre of innocent citizens – for it was Brissot who had been behind the petition that caused the débâcle on the Champ de Mars on 17 July, almost a year before. It was Brissot who had insisted on calling for the abolition of the
monarchy, when all the Jacobins had wanted was a referendum on the role of the king after his flight to Varennes. This – obviously – was splitting hairs. Robespierre had wanted to put the king on trial in 1791 and the call for a referendum was itself a challenge to the future of the monarchy. Here, however, it suited him to implicate Brissot in the
bloodshed on the Champ de Mars: of all the crimes in the Revolution so far, the one that would never be forgotten or forgiven. Not even his worst enemy could claim that Brissot had intended the massacre – but he was nonetheless culpable, in Robespierre’s eyes, of inept and impolitic behaviour. More recently, Robespierre argued, Brissot was even
more culpable for collaborating with General Lafayette over the disastrous war. According to Robespierre, Brissot’s mask of patriotism had slipped and he now ripped it off. So much for rising above the factional strife and publishing a journal of Olympian impartiality!

Also in the first issue of *Le Défenseur de la Constitution* was
Robespierre’s recent retort to Brissot in the Jacobin Club, delivered just after the declaration of war. Brissot had come again to the Jacobins to put an end to Robespierre’s vituperations. ‘What have you done,’ he asked dramatically, ‘to give you the right to criticize me and my friends?’ Robespierre seized the opportunity to summarise his own
contributions to the Revolution so far. Now the readers of his journal throughout France (and beyond, if the bookseller kept his promise) would learn the story of his early revolutionary career.

When I was only a member of a very small tribunal [in Arras], I opposed the
Lamoignon Edicts on grounds of the principle of popular sovereignty, when superior tribunals only opposed them on form ... In the epoch of primary assemblies [in Arras] I alone insisted that we not merely reclaim, but also exercise the rights of sovereignty
... When the Third Estate [in Arras] wanted humbly to thank the nobles for their false renunciation of financial privileges, I persuaded them to declare only that they did not have the right to give to the people that which already belonged to them.
In Robespierre’s eyes, one overwhelming conclusion followed from these flawless revolutionary credentials: those attacking him three years later, in political circumstances changed beyond all recognition, could only be enemies of the people. By now, Robespierre was personally invested in the public image of himself as incorruptible: he was not and
had never been in the wrong. In this context, further comparison with Danton is illuminating. On one of the rare occasions that Danton spoke about himself in public, he was able to say: ‘If I was carried away by enthusiasm in the first days of our regeneration, have I not atoned for it? Have I not been ostracised?’ Robespierre could not have spoken these
words. Atonement – for all his religious sensibility – was outside his repertoire; martyrdom made more sense to him. Like Danton, he had given himself to the people and could envisage dying for them; but unlike Danton, he could never admit that he might have been wrong. Why? Because he was a self-righteous and hypocritical prig? In some respects, he
certainly was. Yet it is the political implications of the differences between the two men that really matter in the history of the Revolution. Both aspired to be popular leaders. Danton’s identification with the people was objective – when he could, he left his flawed, colourful, life-loving self out of politics. For him, the distinction between private
and public life was rarely confused. In contrast, Robespierre’s identification with the people was subjective. If he was wrong the people were wrong, and that, as Rousseau had assured him, simply could not be the case. Later in the Revolution, when his wife suddenly died, Danton was plunged into deep personal grief; despite his many alleged infidelities,
he had loved her passionately. Robespierre wrote to him: ‘I love you more than ever, I love you until death. At this moment, I am you. Do not harden your heart to the voice of friendship.’ To anyone who did not know Robespierre, such a letter at such a time might have seemed a bit gauche and offensively self-centred. Danton, however, did know
Robespierre, and recognised that that capacity to channel himself into someone or something else – to seamlessly identify with something beyond himself and make it his own – was the very centre of his friend’s extraordinary self.

For someone staking both his personal and political
credibility on never being wrong, Robespierre’s defence of the ailing constitutional monarchy was extremely risky. In 1789 he had argued vehemently, but unsuccessfully, against giving the king a legislative veto. Now, over matters of religion and the army, Louis XVI was on the brink of using his veto against the Legislative Assembly. After their
appointment in March 1792, Brissot’s friends pursued a policy on religion guaranteed to antagonise the king. On 24 April, four days into the foreign war, Roland (supported or perhaps even inspired by his avidly political wife) called for repressive measures against the refractory priests whom Robespierre himself had already identified as a major
counter-revolutionary threat. A month later, on 24 May, the Assembly approved a decree to banish and deport all members of the clergy who still refused to swear the oath to the Civil Constitution. Effectively, this sanctioned a nationwide priest-hunt, and it was obvious that Louis XVI, already in such trouble with his conscience, would baulk at approving the persecution
of Catholic priests. A showdown between the Assembly and the king, at a time when the ministers it had imposed on him were calling for a republic, would certainly have resulted in the collapse of the constitution. Given his recent defence of it, Robespierre would have been left looking foolish, the hapless defender of a hopeless cause. The fact that
he was prepared to risk this is testimony to two things: his confidence in himself as a revolutionary leader, and his irreconcilable differences with Brissot’s faction, from which he wanted to distinguish himself at any cost.

The view that the refractory priests were a threat to the Revolution was far from eccentric, and it
would be unreasonable to blame Brissot’s faction for the trouble it caused the king in this respect. But the faction went a step beyond troubling Louis XVI’s conscience to menacing his person, when it persuaded the Assembly to abolish his personal bodyguard. Holed-up inside the Tuileries, pinning their hopes on a foreign invasion and maintaining a stalwart
sense of humour as the tide of hostility flowed round them (‘a pike with a *bonnet rouge* walked around the [Tuileries] garden … and did not stay long’) was all very well, but none of the royals could ignore the implications of the removal of their guards. They were even more alarmed to hear that the bodyguards were to be replaced not by ordinary Parisian National Guards
(most of whom were headed for the front line), but by members of a new federalist army, called to Paris from the provinces and selected by local Jacobin clubs. This proposal was as offensive to the National Guard as it was threatening to the king and his family. Many people – thousands of National Guards among them – thus urged him to use his veto and put a stop
both to the new army and to the persecution of the priests. On holiday in Arras in the autumn of 1791, Robespierre had fixed on two main sources of revolutionary anxiety: France’s armed forces, and its refractory priests. Six months later, his twin anxieties were proving prophetic.

The idea of a new patriot army, summoned to Paris to
supplement if not actually replace the National Guards, was originally Robespierre’s. He had first suggested something of the kind in one of his anti-war speeches to the Jacobins, when he imagined a new federation of civilian soldiers from all over France regenerating public spirit on the Champ de Mars. Since then, in the very first issue of his journal,
he had called for an army of 60,000 veteran soldiers to be assembled and garrisoned close to Paris. To his dismay, Brissot’s friend in the ministry (Joseph Servan, the new Minister for War) was calling for something disconcertingly similar: a new national army of twenty thousand men chosen and sent to Paris by local Jacobin clubs throughout France. The
problem, from Robespierre’s point of view, was to determine which of the Jacobin factions would do the choosing – his own or Brissot’s? Where would the loyalties of the new troops really lie? For all his exertions on the Jacobin Correspondence Committee, there was next to nothing he could do to ensure the outcome he desired. Instead,
he channelled his energy into an elaborate theoretical discussion of military discipline that filled twenty pages of the next issue of his journal. From this it emerged that he was as intent on applying democratic principles to the armed forces as to any other sector of society.

Every soldier was also a citizen and every citizen also
a member of the human race, Robespierre insisted. He envisaged duties attached to each of these three spheres in ascending order – the professional duties of a soldier were narrower than his duties as a citizen, which in turn were narrower still than his duties as a human being. Yet he completely evaded the real issue in this area: what is to happen if, or
when, these spheres of duty collide? The one example of such a collision that he mentioned was ludicrous. He imagined an off-duty soldier chatting up a woman at a party and being ordered by his superior officer to stop: ‘Your presence here displeases me, I order you to return to barracks and forbid you to talk to this woman. I reserve for myself alone the
pleasure of conversing with her.' Irritating as such a scenario would no doubt be for the frustrated soldier, it hardly got to the heart of the problem of military discipline in a country slipping into civil war. The first anniversary of the Champ de Mars massacre was just weeks away. In the immediate aftermath of that massacre, Robespierre had done well to remind the
Jacobins that the National Guards who obeyed General Lafayette and fired on unarmed civilians were not to blame for their orders – were themselves still citizens and patriots too. But there was a huge difference between struggling to limit the bloodshed in a political crisis and delineating a coherent theory of how soldiers could be held to their duties.
Unexpectedly, fragile, bookish Robespierre turned out far more talented at the practice than the theory of politics. Before the Revolution he had been a competent lawyer and a second-rate essayist; in its maelstrom he was emerging a quirkily brilliant politician. As blossoms fell once again from the cherry trees in the Tuileries gardens and the
spring of 1792 ripened into summer, however, he was still overshadowed by Brissot’s faction.

The inner circle round Brissot was presided over by Mme Roland, growing ever more imperious in her modest parlour. They now planned a republic for part, if not all, of France. ‘We spoke often’, she reported,
about the excellent spirit in the Midi, the energy of the departments there and the facilities which that part of France might provide for the foundation of a Republic should the Court succeed in subjugating the north of France and Paris. We got out the maps;
we drew the line of demarcation. Servan [Minister for War] studied the military positions; we calculated the forces available and examined the means of reorganising supply. Each of us contributed ideas as to where and from whom we might expect
Roland’s wife had come a long way since she married an obscure bureaucrat twenty years her senior – out of intellectual respect. Now she bent her pretty head over maps of France and helped the ministry to divide it into putative republican and monarchical segments. On 10 June she prompted Roland to
write an open letter to the king denouncing his threat to use his veto to delay the Assembly’s decrees on the refractory priests and the new federal army (due to arrive in Paris in time for the third anniversary of the fall of the Bastille on 14 July). She may even have drafted the words in which Roland effectively accused the king of treason: ‘much more delay and a
grieving people will see in its King the friend and accomplice of conspirators’. Unsurprisingly, the king responded, two days later, by dismissing Roland and his friends from the ministry. They had lasted just three months in office.

General Lafayette heard the news on the front line. Still the war continued to go badly. Lafayette struggled
more than ever to integrate new rank-and-file soldiers recruited from the National Guard with remnants of the Old Regime army. There were not enough funds or weapons; the frontier moved closer to Paris every day. In an open letter to the capital, he welcomed the fall of Brissot’s friends and blamed all France’s recent troubles, including the reverses in the
war, on the Jacobin Club: ‘this sect, organised like a district empire, in its metropolitan and affiliated societies, blindly guided by ambitious chiefs, forms a separate corporation in the midst of the French people, whose power it usurps by governing its representatives and proxies’. Did Lafayette have in mind a military coup to coincide with 14 July, as
Robespierre feared? Might he sweep down from the north on his white charger and put a stop once and for all to the relentless bickering in the capital when the nation already had its work cut out fighting a foreign war? If so, there would be bloodshed again on the Champ de Mars, for Paris meanwhile was planning a popular protest in support of the dismissed
Robespierre disapproved. He hated and feared Lafayette: ‘Strike at Lafayette and the nation will be saved’ was his improbable advice to the Jacobins. But he hated Brissot’s faction just as bitterly, so he stood at the tribune and denounced the forthcoming protest:

You [friends of Brissot] that are
sounding so loud an alarm and giving such an impulse to the public mind on the subject of a change of ministry, why do you not employ your power for a more national object – some object worthy of the French people? If you have grievances lay them before the
Assembly. No doubt a great country is justified in rising in its own defence, but only a degraded people can allow itself to be thrown into such agitation for the interests of individuals and the intrigues of a party.  

He might as well have
said that Brissot was not worth a single drop of patriotic blood. But no one was listening to him. The demonstration in favour of the dismissed ministers and against the king’s veto – widely vilified ever since it was first discussed in 1789 – was planned for 20 June: the third anniversary of the Tennis Court Oath at Versailles. The Jacobin and
Cordeliers clubs, the municipal government of Paris, the electoral assemblies of the city’s forty-eight sections were all involved. The plan was to present a petition to the Assembly and plant a tree of liberty in the Tuileries. But the petitioners also wanted permission to bring their weapons, a request refused by the municipal government. As mayor of
Paris, Pétion found himself in a very difficult position. He did not want to be blamed for suppressing the protest, but nor did he want responsibility for the bloodshed that might result if the crowd was armed. He referred the problem on to Pierre-Louis Rœderer, now the chief legal adviser of the department of Paris, which had wider responsibilities than the
municipality. Rœderer had the courage to ban the proposed demonstration, calling on the National Guards to stop the protestors from going ahead illegally: another massacre loomed on the Champ de Mars. Pétion, having passed the problem to Rœderer, now disputed his solution, said no power on earth should be allowed to prevent the demonstration,
and suggested that the National Guards march alongside the petitioners, rather than against them. The National Guards were divided: some were delighted to join the petitioners, others refused.

At 5 a.m. on the morning of 20 June, a mob began to assemble at the site of the fallen Bastille. Later in the day it set off with a tree of
liberty in the direction of the Tuileries. Rœderer, furious at the flouting of his advice, got there first, entered the Manège and told the Assembly that had it not recently broken a constitutional rule to admit armed men into one of its own sessions, the impending crisis would never have loomed. One of Brissot's friends stood up and retorted
that since the Assembly had indeed recently received armed men, when the Châteauvieux soldiers marched through the Manège, it would be a gross insult to the people of Paris if their petition was rejected merely because it came accompanied by arms. Before the deputies could decide how to settle this argument, the mob arrived and forced its way
into the debating hall. The demonstrators were persuaded to leave peacefully, but only on the condition that they would be allowed to march back in later. And so they did, drums, weapons, pikes, banners and all; for the second time in three months the Assembly applauded the rabble-rousing music of the people in arms. It drew the line only at a
bloody bullock’s heart skewered on a pike and inscribed ‘THE HEART OF AN ARISTOCRAT’. This was one popular emblem too many for the deputies and they sent it straight outside, where it was paraded instead at the gates of the Tuileries. The single pike, which the king’s sister had laughed at in April, was back in the garden in June, covered in blood:
‘DEATH TO VETO AND HIS WIFE’, the crowd menaced from below. When it came to the planting of the tree of liberty – which, after the presentation of the petition to the Assembly and the king, was the ostensible point of the demonstration – a new problem arose. There were twenty-four battalions of National Guards strategically positioned in and
around the Tuileries and the palace gates were closed. The petitioners had no hope of forcing their way into the gardens, and anyway it would have been absurd to risk a bloody confrontation over planting a tree, even if it was a tree of liberty. They compromised and planted it instead behind the Assembly in the courtyard of the Capucins convent on the
south side of the rue Saint-Honoré, almost directly opposite the Duplays’ house. If Robespierre was at home in his room that day – and very likely he was – he could have watched the planting from his first-floor window. Otherwise he played no part.

Given the number of National Guards defending the Tuileries – ten battalions on the western terrace of the
palace alone – it was, and remains, something of a mystery that the demonstrating mob did finally manage to get inside. One explanation is that a delegation of municipal officers went to the king and complained that the locked gates were offensive to the people, who were merely holding a peaceful demonstration on the
anniversary of the Tennis Court Oath. They may, or may not, have pointed out that back in 1789 it was the king’s attempt to lock the Third Estate out of its own meeting hall in Versailles that led to it reassembling in a tennis court and swearing never to be disbanded until the nation had received a new constitution. Three years later, to the very day, it was
locked out again and definitely no less offended. In another letter to her friend the Marquise de Raigecourt, the king’s sister wrote her account of that frightening day, from the perspective of those trapped inside the Tuileries:

For three days before the 20 [June] we expected a great
upheaval in Paris … but thought we had taken all necessary precautions to ward off every danger. Wednesday morning the courtyard and garden were full of troops. At midday we learnt that the faubourg Saint-Antoine was on the march; it brought a
petition to the Assembly, and did not declare its plan to cross the Tuileries [garden]. Fifteen hundred people filed into the Assembly; a few National Guards and some Invalids; the rest sans-culottes and women. Three municipal officers came to ask the King
to allow the demonstrators to enter the garden, saying that the Assembly was troubled by the crowd, and the passageways so crammed that the gates might be forced. The King told them to arrange with the commandant to let them defile along the terrace of the
Feuillants and go out by the gate of the riding-school [Manège].

Despite these orders, shortly afterwards the other gates of the garden were opened. Soon the garden was full [of demonstrators]. The pikes began to defile in order under the
terrace in front of the Palace, where there were three lines of National Guards … The National Guard, which had not been able to obtain any orders since the morning, had the grief of watching them cross the courtyard without being able to bar the way … At this
point, we were at the King’s window ... The doors were closed ...

... The pikes entered the chamber like a thunderbolt; they looked for the King, especially one of them, who said the most dreadful things ...

... At last Pétion and members of the municipality arrived.
The first harangued the people, and after praising the ‘dignity’ and ‘order’ with which they had marched, he invited them to retire with ‘the same calmness’ so that no one could reproach them for abandoning themselves to excess during a ‘civic
festival’. At last the populace began to depart … The King returned to his room, and nothing could be more touching than the moment when the queen and his children threw themselves around his neck. The deputies who were there burst into tears … At ten o’clock the
Palace was empty again, and everyone went to bed ... The Jacobins are sleeping.
These are the details of the 20 June. Adieu; I am well; I kiss you, and am thankful you are not here in the fray.\textsuperscript{57}

Hearing of the mob’s invasion of the Tuileries,
Lafayette decided to wait no longer, abandoned his embattled troops on the front line and returned to Paris demanding the punishment of the perpetrators of 20 June, the destruction of the Jacobin Club and a return to law and order. He went to see the king, for the last time as it turned out. ‘The King told me in the presence of the Queen and his family’, Lafayette
reported, ‘that the Constitution was his safety, and that he was the only person who observed it.’ By now this was true. Robespierre was still publishing his journal, *Le Défenseur de la Constitution*, but the presence of Lafayette in Paris – the general’s open hostility to the Jacobins and the imminent threat of a military coup – reunited him
temporarily with Brissot’s faction. For the time being, the enemies of Robespierre’s enemy Lafayette were his friends. He began to work with them for ‘the constitutional rising against the constitution’, maintaining through this contorted paradoxical phrase the impression that he had not been wrong to defend the constitution in recent months,
and was not wrong now in seeking to overthrow it. By his own standards, he came dangerously close to admitting he had been wrong on the war. In the eighth issue of his journal he reflected on it at length, introducing a strained distinction between a war of liberty and a war of intrigue or ambition:

When a powerful
nation conducts a war of liberty it arises in its entirety, it marches under leaders that it has chosen from the most zealous defenders of equality and the general interest. At the time it declares [a war of liberty] formidable preparations are in place to assure the
success of its enterprise. Its object is sublime; its force invincible; its measures wise and grand; its attacks prompt and irresistible … It does not purchase a painful victory through torrents of blood.\textsuperscript{59}

A war of intrigue,
conducted by one tyrannous power against another, was altogether different. It led to oppression and crimes against liberty on the home front as well as on the battlefield – there could be no hope of unity between opposed nations if their only point of contact was clashing armies sacrificing themselves for the despots, the enemies of liberty, who ruled them. For
the last three months, according to Robespierre, France had been involved in the second of these two kinds of war: a disgraceful war of intrigue. But the time had come to convert it into an admirable war of liberty. True patriots must replace treacherous generals like Lafayette. Liberty must first be secured at home and then carried triumphantly,
effortlessly, abroad. Citing famous examples of bloodshed he promised:

Unhappy French, Belgian, German slaves of the tyrants who divide the human race like base herds, you will be free; doubt it not; I swear it by the burning of Courtrai; by the
children of Brabançons, murdered in their mother’s wombs and carried blood-soaked on the points of Austrian bayonets; I swear it by the shades of Avignon who perished at the hands of our common enemies; I swear it by our wives and children slaughtered
by cowards on the Champ de Mars; by the defenders of the fatherland ... by the patriots; I swear it by the foreign armies ... and by the traitors who summoned them ... I swear it by the Declaration of the Rights of Man, so solemnly promulgated and insolently
violated; by the disasters of twenty centuries; by our ancestors whom we must avenge, by our descendants whom we must liberate, and by ourselves whom we must save.  

This was characteristically personal, populist and hysterical. But was
Robespierre really now endorsing the war he had so adamantly opposed? Yes and no. He endorsed it, but only in so far as it conformed to his vision of a democratic war – the war of a free people against the despots of an oppressed people, in the interests of those oppressed people who would welcome their invading army with open arms. Robespierre had
never been to war. The closest he came to it was brawling in the playground at Louis-le-Grand, where he had a reputation for defending the smaller boys against bullies. His distinction between a war of liberty and a war of intrigue made sense in theory, but how would it look on the battlefield? Is a democratic war – or a war waged in the name of democracy – so very
different from any other when it comes to the fighting? Those easy, bloodless, swift, efficient, popular victories Robespierre envisaged are extremely scarce.

When Brissot’s party had proposed calling a new federal army of twenty thousand men to Paris, Robespierre had been critical. Despite the king’s threatened veto, the new army was now
assembling in Paris, ready for the annual celebration of the fall of the Bastille. In the next issue of his journal, Robespierre addressed these federal forces directly. Their mission, he tells them, is to save the constitution, not the constitution as drafted in 1791, but the timeless constitution that guarantees sovereignty and natural rights. ‘The fatal hour strikes
... let us march to the field of Federation. There is the Altar of the Fatherland! There the place where the French once strengthened the bonds of their political association!' Let them do so again, he entreats, but this time not in the presence of false idols like Louis XVI and General Lafayette: ‘Let us take no oath but to the country and to ourselves; and let us take it at
the hands not of the King of France, but of the immortal King of Nature, who made us for liberty and punishes our oppressors.’ Robespierre had never missed the 14 July festival. He was there in 1790, standing behind the king in the pavilion. He was there again in 1791, when the king was absent, in disgrace, and the Assembly was wavering over its response to
the flight to Varennes. Now he was there for the third time, mindful of the blood that had been spilt on the Altar of the Fatherland during the Champ de Mars massacre; mindful of the blood that was still being spilt at the front line; and wondering how long it would be before another Parisian insurrection brought the monarchy to an end. From the crowd he heard cries of
‘Vive Pétion!’ But if he was jealous of his friend he did not show it. Pétion was prominent in people’s minds because he had been briefly arrested after the invasion of the Tuileries, then quickly reinstated as mayor. At the close of the National Assembly in 1791, and afterwards in Bapaume and Arras, the crowd had shouted ‘Vive Pétion!’ Vive
Robespierre!’ Now it was only ‘Vive Pétion!’ but not for much longer.

Robespierre hoped that when it came, the insurrection would sweep all before it: the king, his ministry; the Legislative Assembly; the army generals; departmental administrators and municipal government. In preparation for all the changes to come, the electoral assemblies of
Paris’s forty-eight sections went into permanent session. Robespierre wrote approvingly to his crippled friend Couthon, who was taking a mud cure at Saint-Amand: ‘The Revolution is about to take a more rapid course, unless it buries itself in military despotism and dictatorship ... The Paris Sections are manifesting an energy and prudence worthy
to serve as a model for the rest of the state. We miss you.’ On 30 July, armed men from Marseille arrived in Paris as part of the new federal army. They had threatened to come once before to save Robespierre after the Champ de Mars massacre. Now they came dragging cannons: a black cloud on the horizon advancing rapidly toward the
capital and singing a new song, the Marseillaise. ‘If they leave Paris without saving the country, all is lost,’ Robespierre wrote to his friend Buissart in Arras. ‘We all intend to lay down our lives in the capital rather than shrink from risking everything in a final attempt.’ Later that evening he was in the chair at the Jacobins as the recent
manifesto from the Duke of Brunswick, the commander of the enemy forces, was read out. Brunswick threatened to hold all Paris answerable for the safety of the king: ‘… if the Palace of the Tuileries be insulted or forced … if the least violence, the least assault, be perpetrated against their Majesties, the King, the Queen and the Royal Family’, Paris would suffer ‘an
exemplary and never-to-be-forgotten vengeance ... martial law and complete destruction’. At this grandiose threat, the Jacobins burst out laughing. But Robespierre refused to participate in their frivoliy. He suspended the meeting early, appealing for calm. Again and again he cautioned against a premature insurrection that would only
play into the hands of the people’s enemies and turn public opinion against the true friends of liberty. If it had been up to him to give the signal, to decide that the time had definitely come for the people to rise up and revolt, he might never have done so. He wanted his ‘constitutional rising against the constitution’, but he both feared it and was afraid for it.
These fears, in the circumstances, were wholly reasonable.

It was Danton who gave Paris the signal. First he went home to Arcis and settled money on his seventy-year-old mother in case he was killed. Then he came back and called together representatives of the city’s forty-eight sections. On
the night of 9 August they formed the Insurrectionary Commune, planning to take over the municipal government (which Danton himself had belonged to in recent months). Danton briefly lay down to rest as his colleagues rang the tocsin in the tower of the Cordelier Church nearby. The tocsin echoed across the city, a call to arms resounding from the
churches of central and eastern Paris. Robespierre heard it in the section of the Place Vendôme, where the lights in the houses had been lit again. He sat in the Duplays’ cellar, running up the narrow stairs to his bedroom from time to time, if his curiosity got the better of him and he wanted to look out of a first-floor window. According to Lucile
Desmoulins, there had been a recent attempt to assassinate him, so he was even more nervous and suspicious than usual. The bell rang all night, like a troubled infant that cannot sleep – rhythmic, relentless, inconsolable – but it did not, at first, bring the people out into the streets. Perhaps it woke the Desmoulins’ baby, now nearly a year old – but too
young still to know his godfather, Robespierre. Camille had gone out with a gun, and Lucile remembered how ‘The tocsin of the Cordeliers rang, it rang for a long time. Bathed in tears, kneeling at the window, my face hidden in a handkerchief, I listened to the sound of that fatal bell. People came to comfort me in vain. It seemed to me that the day which
preceded this deadly one had been our last.’ From 2 a.m. Danton was giving orders to the insurrectionists from the Hôtel de Ville. Eventually a crowd for the storming of the Tuileries assembled. Unlike the Bastille, the palace was properly defended, and there was likely to be considerable loss of life. Since 20 June the king had recalled his loyal Swiss Guard and his
constitutional bodyguards. Several battalions of National Guards were on his side too, and Pierre-Louis Rœderer was there again, giving advice on behalf of the department of Paris, while pacing nervously round the Tuileries gardens. Louis XVI thought that Paris could be subdued; he regretted not having done it in 1789; he would do it now with belated
help from Europe’s invading army, whose arrival in the capital was, surely, only weeks away.

At dawn, the king’s sister called the queen to the window to see the summer sun rise; allegedly, it was very red that day. The king, like Danton, had not slept, only lain down for a little in his violet breeches, flattening his curls and rubbing the
powder from one side of his head. Still dishevelled, he heard of the arrival of an early-morning message from the Insurrectionary Commune, demanding that the current head of the National Guard, a man named Mandat, leave the palace and present himself at the Hôtel de Ville immediately. He did so and was murdered on the steps outside (where de
Flesselles and Governor de Launay had been butchered by the crowd after the fall of the Bastille). By 6 a.m., Röderer had persuaded the king to seek sanctuary in the Manège – just a short walk across the garden – where the Legislative Assembly had been burning candles through the night. The queen was opposed. She thought they should fight on with their
‘considerable forces’, but Rœderer rebuffed her with: ‘Madame, all Paris is against you.’ 68 It was only 10 August, but the leaves in the garden had started to fall. As they walked through them, the Dauphin kicked them playfully into the air and the king remarked, ‘What a quantity of leaves! They fall early this year,’ knowing as he did that the popular press
had been claiming for months that the monarchy would not last beyond autumn. In the Assembly he said, ‘I am come hither to prevent a great crime; and I think I can be nowhere more secure, gentlemen, than in the midst of you.’ The president assured him he was right, but then one of the deputies drew attention to the constitutional rule against the Legislative
Assembly deliberating in the presence of the king. So the royal family was quickly ushered out into a side room, where they could watch the Assembly’s proceedings through a grate. For all the president’s and Rœderer’s reassurances, that room was the first of their real prisons.

Outside, the fighting began. Led by the Marseillais, on whom
Robespierre pinned such high hopes, the armed mob – estimated at twenty thousand – succeeded in entering the palace at around 9 a.m. But they were driven out again when the Swiss Guard – a force of nine hundred professional soldiers – opened fire. The battalions of National Guards that had remained loyal to Louis XVI now joined forces with the
mob, and an hour later the Swiss Guard was in retreat. Around six hundred of them were hacked to pieces. Several hundred of the mob – National Guards, shopkeepers, tradesmen and artisans among them – were also killed in the siege. By midday well over a thousand lay wounded or dead among the fallen leaves. The queen had been right: the defence of
the Tuileries was formidable. Contrary to appearances, however, to the stretchers and screams, the loss of blood and life, this was a victory for the people. Afterwards they lit celebratory bonfires to burn not early autumn debris, but the naked bodies of the slain Swiss Guards.

That evening, Robespierre was at the Jacobins as usual. Here he offered his views on
events of the last twenty-four hours, and afterwards published them in his paper for wider circulation. For him it was a new beginning, like the fall of the Bastille, but better, wiser, purer:

In 1789, the people of Paris raised themselves tumultuously to repel the attacks of the
court, to free themselves of the old despotism, more than to conquer liberty, the idea of which was still confused, its principles unknown. All passions concurred in the insurrection and the signal it gave to the whole of France.

In 1792 it [the
people of Paris] has raised itself with imposing sang-froid to avenge the fundamental laws of its violated liberty, all the infidel mandatories who sought to enslave once again the imprescriptible rights of humanity. It has put into action the
principles proclaimed three years ago by its first representatives; it has exercised its recognised sovereignty, and deployed its power and its justice to assure its own safety and happiness.

In 1789 it was helped by a great number of those who
were called great, by a party of men who took back the power of government.

In 1792 it has found all its own resources, both its direction and its force; alone, it has protected justice, equality and reason against their enemies. Not only did the people of Paris
give a great example to France, the French people rose up at the same time. The solemnity with which it proceeded in this great act was as sublime as its motives and object. 70

Robespierre urged his audience to believe that the promise of 1789 had been
recaptured with the fall of the Tuileries. Everything that had gone wrong in the Revolution since the Bastille fell, all those departures from true principles that he had disputed so fervently in Versailles, and afterwards in Paris; all the compromises of the new constitution and its flawed enactment after 1791; all the disruption, misdirection and confusion
caused by factional fighting at the Jacobins; all the life already squandered in an incipient civil war; all the life lost on the front line in a foreign war that was going badly wrong – it would all be cancelled and redeemed now that the Revolution had recovered its true course. There is no reason whatsoever to suspect Robespierre’s revolutionary
optimism. He was speaking and writing from his heart; and those who dispute his interpretation of events cannot deny his sincerity. Mirabeau had said of him in 1789, ‘That man will go far, he believes everything he says.’ Quite how far, now that the monarchy had finally fallen, not even Mirabeau could have guessed.
SEVERAL WEEKS AFTER the storming of the Tuileries,
Paris was still in turmoil. Pétion remained mayor. Lafayette had fled the country. The Legislative Assembly continued to meet in the Manège. France was again without a constitution and government. To acquire these, a new nationally representative body would need to be elected and invested with constituting power. In the interim, the
Assembly re-called Brissot’s friends (Roland, Servan and Clavière) to ministerial office and formed a provisional government. Danton was made Minister for Justice, in recognition of the part he had played in ending the monarchy. It was possible for Danton to serve alongside Brissot’s friends because there was no personal animosity between him and
them, but Robespierre could never have done so. Instead, he threw himself into the politics of his section, the Place Vendôme section, soon renamed Section des Piques (pikes). Meetings were daily and increasingly dominated by sans-culottes, determined to further the revolutionary demands of the poor and disadvantaged. From here Robespierre was elected to
the Insurrectionary Commune. The Commune was a body of 288 members, formed by the election of six representatives from each of the forty-eight sections of Paris. Like Robespierre’s, many of these sections were radical, so sent to the Commune representatives likely to push for extreme measures, such as economic redistribution and price
controls on essential commodities. But the sections, the Commune, the mayor, the Legislative Assembly and the provisional government could not reliably control the streets, filled with panic after the Duke of Brunswick kept his promise and marched into France on 19 August.

By the beginning of September the invading army
was at Verdun (only fifteen miles from Varennes), where the last fortress on the road to Paris surrendered. Less than a month earlier, the Jacobins had laughed at the duke’s manifesto and its threat to raze Paris. But no one was laughing now. Black flags flew from the towers of Notre Dame and above the Hôtel de Ville, with the word ‘Danger’ (the same in French and
English) emblazoned in white letters. The city gates were closed. The prisons were crammed with royalists, refractory priests and other suspects summarily arrested since the fall of the monarchy. The patriots were afraid to leave the city to fight Brunswick’s forces in case the counter-revolution took hold in their absence. Nor could they sit and wait
calmly for the destruction of Paris. Towards the end of another restless weekend, there was a sudden crescendo of violence:

- Twenty-four priests, conveyed in four carriages to the prison of the Abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Près, on Sunday afternoon, 2 September 1792, were set upon by a mob and
murdered.

• One hundred and twenty-two other prisoners inside the abbey were condemned to death later that evening by an informal tribunal. They were taken outside and killed with pikes.

• About a hundred and fifty priests held at the Convent of the Carmelites, including the Archbishop of Arles and the bishops of Saintes
and Beauvais, were murdered.

- Two hundred thieves and debtors held at the Châtelet were slaughtered.

- On Monday 3 September the queen’s friend the Princesse de Lamballe and other prisoners held at La Force were butchered. The princess’s severed head was then paraded on a pike outside the windows of the
Temple, the medieval fortress in the Marais where the royal family were now incarcerated.

- An unknown number of convicts awaiting deportation were murdered.
- So too were an unknown number of priests held at the monastery of Saint-Firmin.
- One hundred and sixty inmates at the Bicêtre
reformatory, forty-three of them between the ages of twelve and eighteen, were murdered.

- On Tuesday 4 September thirty-five women incarcerated at La Salpêtrière on charges of prostitution were sexually assaulted and killed.

So much then for the people’s justice: well over a
thousand victims, some from the weakest and most vulnerable sectors of society, were put to death in the first weeks of the new republic to satisfy the blood lust of the mob that brought down the monarchy. Men, women and children who did not matter to the Revolution, whose names have been forgotten by history, were sacrificed to the braying crowd. Danton
claimed he saw them afterwards in his dreams, shaking their gory locks at him.

How much did Robespierre know about the September massacres? Did he, during those horrific three days, do anything to try to stop the slaughter? He was definitely present at the meeting of the Insurrectionary Commune on
2 September when reports came in about what was happening at the Abbaye Saint-Germain-des-Près. On that day, the Commune did nothing. On 3 September, in response to news of the killings at La Force, it sent someone to investigate ‘the excitement’. As the week wore on, the Commune made no attempt to restrain the violence: it left the most
radical of Paris’s forty-eight sections to do as they liked in the face of it, perhaps because restraint was impossible, or perhaps because members of the Commune genuinely thought the people had earned their right to bloody vengeance. It did, however, send Robespierre across to the Temple, close to his former residence in the rue Saintonge, to make sure that
‘everything was quiet there’. The royal family were potentially valuable hostages if the advance of Brunswick’s invading army could not be stopped; they must not be perfunctorily cut down in the general bloodletting. When he got to the Temple, Robespierre found everything in order, if not exactly quiet. There was no reason for him to ascend the narrow winding
stair of the tower in which the deposed king and his family were imprisoned and guarded by sans-culottes. Outside, the patriot Palloy, who had turned the demolition of the Bastille into such a profitable business, was contemplating demolishing the buildings surrounding the tower and erecting a new perimeter wall for extra security, in case the royal family tried to escape.
In 1789 Palloy had destroyed a prison; three years later he was building one.\(^3\) Robespierre, who had seen liberty appear like a vision on the crumbling battlements of the Bastille, probably did not linger looking up at the Temple tower.

Aside from checking that no unauthorised acts were being committed at the Temple, Robespierre
intervened in the Commune’s deliberations for only one purpose: to try and get his opponents – Brissot and Roland – arrested and taken off to prison. There, as he well knew, they would, very likely, be killed immediately, along with the other prisoners condemned by the improvised tribunals set up by the sans-culottes inside the prisons. These makeshift tribunals
acquitted a few fortunate victims, but the rest were hacked to death as they left the temporary courtrooms. Danton saw to it that the arrest warrants for Robespierre’s personal enemies were withdrawn. To sanction, or even encourage, the alarming spectacle of the people’s vengeance was one thing – but to use it to settle personal scores was quite
another. As Danton already knew, however, this was a difference lost on Robespierre. Yet the Duplay family doctor, years later, said Robespierre could never speak of the September massacres without horror. ‘Blood again! Nothing but blood,’ he remembered him saying, in the privacy of the Duplay household. Perhaps, like Danton, he also had
nightmares. After all, Robespierre was still the same squeamish man who collapsed in Arras when his legal duties there required him to condemn a man to death. But now he was also a committed revolutionary leader who knew that he owed his power to the people’s propensity for violence. Without it, the monarchy would not have
fallen on 10 August. Robespierre, for all his refined sensibility, was too astute a politician either to deny this fact or ignore it: mob violence was there to be compromised with, not censured by the revolutionaries whose careers it had done so much to promote. His solution was to demand the establishment of an official Revolutionary
Tribunal, which, he insisted, would maintain the peace, satisfy the people’s impatience for justice, and investigate promptly all counter-revolutionary activities. He got his way, and in the short period between the collapse of the monarchy on 10 August and the end of 1792, this tribunal sentenced a total of twenty-eight people to the guillotine.
The guillotine was first used publicly in Paris on 25 April 1792 to execute a criminal named Nicholas Jacques Pelletier. It was erected on scaffolding and positioned outside the Hôtel de Ville on the Place de Grève, where Damiens and others had been gruesomely dispatched under the Old Regime. On that day, anticipating a large crowd at
this new public spectacle and worried about maintaining order, Pierre-Louis Rœderer wrote to General Lafayette asking him to ensure that the National Guards remain in place until the execution was over and the scaffolding had been dismantled (when it was first introduced, the guillotine was kept in store and out of sight). The day was long in coming. Pelletier had been
condemned for robbery and murder soon after the National Assembly made decapitation the only legal capital punishment. He had had to wait in gaol for over three months while the guillotine was built in Strasbourg according to the design of the surgeon M. Antoine Louis, at a cost of 38 livres. Some more weeks passed while the public
executioner Charles Henri Sanson tested the machine on corpses in the Bicêtre hospital. Sanson favoured the guillotine because he knew the practical problems of trying to decapitate a person with a sword – the nobility’s Old Regime privilege.

How can the executioner have the necessary power over
a man who will not or cannot keep himself in a convenient posture? It seems, however, that the National Assembly only devised this species of execution [decapitation] for the purpose of avoiding the protracted executions of the old way [hanging]. It is in
furtherance of these humane views that I have the honour of giving this forewarning of the many accidents that executions may produce if attempted by the sword. It is therefore indispensable that, in order to fulfil the humane intentions of
the National Assembly, some means should be found both to avoid delays and ensure certainty, by fixing the patient so that the success of the operation shall not be doubtful.\(^5\)

After 10 August and the establishment of the
Revolutionary Tribunal that Robespierre demanded, the guillotine was set up closer to the Tuileries palace, on either the Place de Carrousel or the Place de la Révolution. As it turned out, though, very few of the twenty-eight condemned by the new tribunal were executed for political crimes: like the murderer Pelletier, most were just ordinary criminals.
When he first outlined his idea of a democratic war – a war of defence, not conquest, conducted by the whole people, armed with pikes if nothing more – Robespierre’s was an isolated eccentric voice at the Jacobins. One year on, the people rose up as he had said they would, to grab whatever weapons they could and meet the invading army on the road from
Valmy. During those early days of September, as bodies were piled up in the prisons, thousands of patriot volunteers collected on the Champ de Mars, ready to die for the fatherland. Danton urged them on with the most famous speech he ever made, this man with stentorian lungs to equal Mirabeau’s, who spoke five languages, but none so fluently as the
language of the crowd. His speech ended: ‘Audacity! Yet more audacity! Always audacity – and France will be saved.’ (Danton’s heavy engagement in trying to save revolutionary France might account for his reported callousness with regard to the prison victims. When asked what to do about them, he replied, according to Mme Roland, ‘Let them save
themselves.

The tocsin rang out as it had before. The royal family listened to it in their beds in the Temple. They heard it accompanied by Marie Antoinette’s anguished cries for her murdered friend whose beautiful blonde head had been paraded on a pike at the window. Fortunately for the Revolution, unfortunately for the royal family, the fighting
at Valmy went well – the French forces, an amalgam of old army professional soldiers, National Guards and new volunteers, repelled the Duke of Brunswick’s troops, charging into battle and shouting above the cannon fire, ‘Vive la nation!’ The poet Goethe was with the invading army. On the evening of 20 September, as the autumn nights were
drawing in, he sat with other downcast Prussian soldiers, huddled round a campfire. They asked him what he made of the day’s events and he pronounced: ‘Here and today a new epoch in the history of the world has begun, and you can boast you were present at its birth.’ Europe’s first concerted attempt to end the Revolution had failed.
Robespierre, of course, was far from the battlefield. It is doubtful whether he even knew how to fire a musket, or would have lasted an hour in the mud at Valmy. Instead, he was doing something at which he had, over the last three years, become extremely skilled: electioneering. He was in the vanguard of those demanding a new representative
assembly to draft France’s first republican constitution. Soon after 10 August he had published his own call to arms in his journal: ‘You must prepare the success of this Convention by the regeneration of the spirit of the people. Let all awake – all, all arise – all arm; and the enemies of liberty will hide themselves in darkness. Let the tocsin of Paris reverberate
in all the Departments. Let the people learn to reason as well as to fight.’ To get himself elected again, Robespierre did both. The existing Legislative Assembly, diminished in power since 10 August, had nevertheless managed to decree that the new elections must be indirect, like the elections of 1789 and 1791. Primary assemblies would
elect members of an electoral body to choose their delegates for them. However, the distinction between active and passive citizens – ones with the vote and ones without – to which Robespierre had always strongly objected, was abolished. Instead there was male universal suffrage: the electoral assemblies were to be chosen by primary
assemblies composed of all independent male citizens over the age of twenty-one, and they were to deliberate in public. In the primary assembly for his Section des Piques (which had already elected him to the Commune), Robespierre was chosen first. His landlord and friend Duplay was another of the sixteen elected. Rabble-rousing Marat, who had
openly approved of the prison massacres, was chosen in another section. When the whole body of 990 representatives for all the sections and suburbs of Paris met, radical patriots dominated it. The body first assembled on 2 September – the day the massacres began – in the Archbishop’s Palace, where the National Assembly had reconvened for a brief
period after moving to Paris from Versailles. Robespierre remembered that this hall had proved very unsuitable and that the National Assembly had soon had to abandon it for the Manège. Indeed, he had been working since the end of August to persuade the representatives to ask permission from the Jacobin Club to meet in its more publicly accessible hall,
where it would be much easier for the people – and of course the Jacobins – to oversee the proceedings. He succeeded. Not content with this, he also proposed, in the name of the primary assemblies, that any of their chosen representatives who had previously displayed monarchist sympathies – who had joined the Feuillants, for example, after the Champ de
Mars massacre – should be excluded immediately. The majority of radical patriots hastened to agree and expelled the dubious minority whom the primary assemblies had only just elected. This time, evidently, the Jacobins would take no chances.

At that first meeting, Robespierre, comfortably out of range of the front line, declared from the tribune that
he would ‘face with perfect calmness the swords of the enemies’. In doing so he would take with him to the grave ‘the certainty that France would remain free, and the satisfaction of having served the fatherland’. Since he was now accompanied everywhere by a bodyguard, to discourage any repetitions of the alleged assassination attempt earlier in the year, he
could not have been as sanguine about going to his grave as he claimed. Two days later he was top of the list of deputies elected to the new National Convention. The person standing against him was Pétion. Their friendship had been strained for months, but after 10 August it deteriorated dramatically. Just days after the storming of the Tuileries,
Pétion, as mayor of Paris, wanted to disband the Insurrectionary Commune and reinstate the municipal government which it had displaced. The Commune commissioned Robespierre to get Pétion to back down. Their meeting did not go well, and soon afterwards Robespierre received yet another disconcerting letter from the man who, only a
year ago, had been his closest revolutionary colleague:

You know, my friend, what my feelings are towards you: you know that I am no rival of yours and that I have always given you proof of my devoted friendship. It would be idle to attempt to divide us. I
could not cease to love you unless you ceased to love liberty. I have always found more fault with you to your face than behind your back. When I think you too ready to take offence, or when I believe, rightly or wrongly, that you are mistaken about a line of action, I tell you so.
You reproach me with being too trustful. You may be right, but you must not assume too readily that many of my acquaintances are your enemies. People can disagree on a number of unessential points, without becoming enemies, and your heart is said to be just.
Besides, it is childish to take offence at the things people say against one. Imagine, my friend, the number of people who utter libels against the mayor of Paris! ... Yet it does not worry me, I can assure you. If I am not totally indifferent to what other people think
about me, at least I value my own opinion more highly … You and I are never likely to take opposite sides. We shall always be of the same political faith. I need not assure you that it is impossible for me to join any movement against you: my tastes, my character,
my principles all forbid it. I don’t believe you covet my position any more than I covet the King’s. But if, when my term of office comes to an end, the people were to offer you the mayoralty, I suppose that you would accept it; whereas, in all good
conscience I could never accept the crown. Keep well. March ahead! The times are too serious to think of anything but the public interest.¹¹

When Robespierre came back from his holiday in Arras and visited Pétion for the first time in his grand new
residence, he had reassured himself nervously that the job would not go to his friend’s head, that his spirit would remain ‘simple and pure as ever’. This pompous letter proved otherwise. For almost a year, Pétion had sat on the fence between the rival factions at the Jacobins, believing, perhaps, that his official position enabled him to rise above the hatred
between Robespierre and Brissot, who were both his friends. He had played the part of peacemaker to no avail. Who, in the circumstances, did he think might offer him a crown? What reason did he have to believe that Robespierre coveted the role of mayor of Paris? Despite his delusions of grandeur, Pétion’s letter captures two of the most
prominent features of Robespierre’s personality: his perennial distrust – ‘Share my fear’, he had urged the Jacobins in 1791 – and his propensity to take personal offence of the most lasting and rancorous kind. Robespierre himself testified to the deep spiteful gratification he experienced in the electoral assembly when he, not Pétion, was
chosen as the first of Paris’s deputies to the Convention. As he wrote to the self-important mayor:

Everyone saw the change in your countenance when, in the progress of the ballot, another name [Robespierre’s own] seemed to have the advantage of yours.
You were aware that it was the Assembly’s intention to have you named the next day, but you left the hall abruptly and never reappeared. You would not even keep your dinner engagements; and you have at last confessed the true motive of your vexation by
saying, ‘Well then, to be candid with you, I did think that if I was named at all, I was entitled to be first.’  

So who was jealous and who was gloating now? Once, Pétion had been all but indistinguishable from Robespierre; his name had been honoured alongside Robespierre’s after the end of
the first National Assembly; and since then his career had gone from strength to strength, but the toast of the crowd at the 14 July celebrations in 1792 was no longer the most popular man in Paris two months later. Pétion’s confident belief that nothing could ever come between himself and Robespierre was not unwarranted – just, as it
turned out, completely mistaken.

After being passed over in the capital, Pétion was elected as a representative to the forthcoming Convention from the department of Eure-et-Loir (which included his home town, Chartres). Brissot was also chosen as a deputy for Eure-et-Loir. Even before
the Convention of 749 deputies met, many of those elected from the provinces, especially those from the Gironde department in western France, were concerned that the Paris delegates, backed by the Commune and the city’s radical sections, would try to dominate proceedings. On the list of Paris’s twenty-four delegates to the Convention,
Robespierre was first, Danton was second, Camille Desmoulins sixth, Marat seventh, the revolutionary artist David twentieth and – rather more surprisingly – Robespierre’s brother from Arras nineteenth. At last Augustin had a real reason to be in Paris. Let people say what they liked about corruption, Robespierre was convinced that his brother
had stood independently and been elected on merit, yet only his own influence could have secured such an unlikely outcome. Augustin had distinguished himself as president of the Arras Jacobins and, since 10 August, had been active in the Arras commune (one of the many provincial imitations of Paris’s Insurrectionary Commune),
but he scarcely knew anyone in the capital. He wasted no time at all in packing his bags. However, it soon became clear that Charlotte was not going to be left behind in an empty house in the rue des Rapporteurs while both her brothers pursued exciting revolutionary careers in the capital. Robespierre’s siblings arrived on his doorstep and proceeded to
move into the Duplay house, renting from 1 October for 1,000 *livres* a year one furnished and one unfurnished room. Inevitably, their arrival disrupted Robespierre’s comfortable Parisian home life. His own rooms at the Duplicays’ had started filling up with congratulatory letters, statuettes, medals and prints of himself. For example,
there was a medal to commemorate 10 August on which he was represented cupping milk flowing from the breasts of Liberty and offering it to a patriot to drink. It would have been ungracious to dispose of these tributes – even if he had wanted to – so instead Robespierre carefully arranged them round his two small rooms, which soon
resembled a shrine.

The Duplays were so proud of their famous patriotic Jacobin lodger, so devoted to him both personally and politically, that Robespierre’s rooms never struck them as peculiar. But Charlotte was uncomfortable. It was not the emergence of a personality cult focused on her older brother that disturbed her.
Nor was it all the pictures of him – he had always been fond of collecting prints, fond too of sketching, and he used to organise small exhibitions when Charlotte and Henriette visited him on those long Sunday afternoons of their childhood in Arras. Admittedly, the subject of the pictures had altered dramatically since those far-off days, but Charlotte was at
least as fixated on Robespierre as the Duplays were, and said nothing about finding his rooms peculiar. It was the private attentions lavished on him by the smotheringly maternal Mme Duplay that irritated her. Even at an epistolary distance she had been jealous at the idea of Robespierre cosseted in the home of another woman; she could imagine
only too well how responsive he would be to this kind of fussing. She knew his domestic character to be ‘débonnaire’ (meek or accommodating), so even before setting foot in number 366, rue Saint-Honoré, she feared finding him passively relaxed in a home she could not control. The reality was intolerable. Almost as soon her clothes were unpacked,
Charlotte began lobbying Robespierre to rent a house of his own. Now that he was an important public figure, he ought, she said, to have an independent establishment. And who better than his sister to preside over it, unimpeded by the likes of Mme Duplay and her irritating daughters? Robespierre, of course, had more important things on his mind than the row
brewing between his sister and his landlady. On 20 September, as Goethe and the rest of the Prussian army retreated before the full force of the French nation, the National Convention met for the first time in Paris. It had two purposes: to win the war and to draft a republican constitution. The Convention officially opened the following morning, with the
newly elected deputies from all over France assembling at the ransacked Tuileries and processing to the Manège, where they filled the vacant seats. The majority of the 749 new deputies had not belonged to either of the two earlier assemblies to meet in that former riding school. But the National Assembly, which had taken over two years to design the
constitutional monarchy, and the Legislative Assembly, which saw it collapse in under a year, seemed very far away now even to those who had experienced them personally. It was only a short walk across the garden from the Tuileries to the Manège – there was no celebratory Mass, no ceremonial robes, none of the symbolism that had moved the Marquis de
Ferrières to write to his wife in 1789: ‘Love for my country has made itself very powerfully felt in my heart. I was not aware just how far the mutual ties extend which unite us all to this soil, to the men who are our brothers, but I understood it in that instance.’ Then Ferrières had been a noble in the procession at Versailles. Now he was in danger of losing his
life: one of the despised enemies of liberty from whom the new National Convention must protect the nascent French Republic.

On that day in 1792, Danton, Camille Desmoulins, Marat, David and Augustin were all there in the procession with Robespierre, but none of them had been with him in 1789. Robespierre was one of a
minority who could compare the two occasions in his head; Pétion was another, but these days the two men were staying far apart, not walking together reminiscing about the past. They entered the Manège at different ends of the procession, and once inside Robespierre and his friends made a point of occupying the high seats at the far end of the hall to the
left of the president’s chair – Pétion had already been chosen as the Convention’s first president, which cannot have pleased them. They sat there looking down, and soon afterwards the group around Robespierre became known as the Mountain; Pétion, Brissot and his friends became the Girondins (so called because some of them came from the department of
the Gironde). And between these two rival factions – bemused or irritated by their crossfire but inextricably caught up in it – there was the Plain: all those new deputies who had only just arrived in Paris to make a republican constitution.

At four o’clock on 21 September, trumpets sounded outside the Temple and a voice pronouncing the formal
abolition of the monarchy boomed through the thick walls and windows of the royal family’s rooms. Louis XVI was reading. Between 10 August 1792 and the start of the New Year he read 250 volumes in several different languages and translated Horace Walpole’s *Historic Doubts on the Life and Reign of King Richard III*. At the announcement of the
Republic, he did not even look up from his book.  

Since 10 August, Robespierre had been too busy to issue his journal. But once the preoccupying business of electioneering was over, he relaunched it under the new title *Lettres à ses commettans* (Letters of Maximilien Robespierre, member of the
National Convention of France, to his Constituents. It was, as ever, a platform for both his theoretical and his practical political concerns. In the first article of the first new issue he argued:

It is not enough to have overturned the throne: our concern is to erect upon its remains holy equality
and the imprescriptible Rights of Man. It is not in the empty word itself that a republic consists, but in the character of the citizens. The soul of a republic is *vertu* – that is, the love of the fatherland, and the high-minded devotion that resolves all private interests into
the general interest. The enemies of the republic are those dastardly egoists, those ambitious and corrupt men. You have hunted down kings, but have you hunted out the vices that their deadly domination has engendered among you? Taken together
you are the most generous, the most moral of all peoples ... but a people that nurtures within itself a multitude of adroit rogues and political charlatans, skilled at usurpation and the betrayal of trust.\textsuperscript{16}

Like an austere godfather at the birth of France’s
republic, Robespierre advised the nation to seek first the enemy within. These were not new sentiments. Before he left Arras for Versailles in 1789 he had written a pamphlet entitled ‘The Enemies of the Fatherland Unmasked’. Absolutely nothing had happened since then to reduce his fear of surreptitious political foes. Now that everyone claimed to
want a republic, he thought the really important distinction was between those who wanted it for their own selfish purposes, and those – himself, for example – who genuinely wanted to found it on the principle of equality and in the general interest. Next he revisited another long-standing concern: fear of executive power. As he understood it, overly strong
governments had caused most of the misery of human society – he was more frightened of despotism than of anarchy. In this, as in his conception of the general interest into which all private interests could, and should, be dissolved, Robespierre was again following Rousseau. Around this time there was a rumour that he slept with a copy of the
Social Contract under his pillow. It does not appear in the inventory of his books taken after his death, but his speeches refer to it so often that there can be no doubt about how much it meant to him. Perhaps one of the Duplays took his personal copy as a keepsake before the inventory was compiled.

At one point in the Social Contract, Rousseau describes
his ideal law-giver. The qualities required in someone truly worthy of formulating the laws are extraordinary: ‘You would need a superior intelligence, that sees all the human passions without experiencing them … that earns a far off glory, perhaps even working in one century for the benefit of another; it would take Gods to give laws to men.’

Robespierre quoted
this passage in full in his article. But then he proceeded to gloss it, significantly altering the meaning so that an unusually admirable human being – Robespierre himself, for example – might enact the role of law-giver that Rousseau had reserved for the Gods:

You would need philosophers as
enlightened as they were intrepid: who experienced the passions of man, but whose first passion would be the horror of tyranny and the love of humanity; treading underfoot vanity, envy, ambition and all the weaknesses of petty souls, inexorable toward crime armed
with power, indulgent toward error, sympathetic toward misery and tender and respectful toward the people.  

This was a self-portrait – an extremely flattering one. Despite his shrine of sorts in the Duplay house, Robespierre probably did not think he was above human
passions, but he did consider himself more self-controlled than most, more resistant to political temptation, more unambivalently for the people, less selfish, less corruptible, perhaps even incorruptible. He seemed to share Rousseau’s belief in the need for an almost superhuman law-giver, omniscient, disinterested and capable of directing the
people for their own good. And he may well have been privately preparing himself to assume just that role. In this context, Robespierre’s vision of democracy was very different from anything we would recognise today. The rule of the people, as he understood it, was not simply derived from the will of the majority. The point was to ensure the triumph of the
good, pure, general will of the people – what the people would want in ideal circumstances – and this needed to be intuited on their behalf until they had received sufficient education to understand their own good. When it came to drafting the laws, to giving France its new republican constitution, Robespierre believed that he was far closer to Rousseau’s
conception of the ideal law-giver than Brissot and his friends could ever have been.

Robespierre’s enemies in the Convention wasted no time. On 25 September, just four days after the official opening, they accused him of aspiring to be a tyrant. His enemies – many of them friends of Brissot’s – were
dismayed at his influence and popularity in the capital. They insisted that since Paris was only one of eighty-three departments in France, its representatives should only have the weight in decisions within the National Convention of one eighty-third. Robespierre, denounced as leader of the Paris deputies in their illegitimate quest for power, hesitated. But Danton
leapt to the tribune to defend him as he had done before at the Jacobin Club. He demanded the death penalty for anyone scheming to destroy the unity of France. By this he meant death to anyone scheming to turn France into a federation of independent departments or small republics in order to diminish the power of Paris. This was one of the
accusations the Mountain levelled against the Girondins. When Robespierre finally stood up to defend himself, he struck a characteristic note. ‘I begin by thanking my accusers. Calumny serves the public good when it clumsily unmasks itself.’ First he appealed, as usual, to his personal patriotic credentials: ‘I did this … I did that …’ he
reminded the Convention, summarising his achievements since 1789 until the audience got restless and someone shouted, ‘Enough!’ Then he said he had long suspected that Brissot’s faction wanted to divide France into a federation of small republics, leaving it even more vulnerable to internal and external enemies than it already was.\textsuperscript{19} He had
not been in the room when Mme Roland and her friends bent over the map and discussed the division of the country into monarchical and republican parts. But now the monarchy had fallen, he was convinced they wanted another kind of division: one that would curtail the influence of Paris, so essential to sustaining revolutionary ideals, and
diminish his own power base. Robespierre’s intervention was subtle and sardonic, but completely overshadowed by the next speaker. Blistering with skin disease and reeking of vinegar, this was the infamous Marat, the so-called L’Ami du Peuple (people’s friend), the indefatigable pamphleteer who, since 1789, had consistently called for
blood and anarchy: ‘I believe in the cutting off of heads,’ he had declared offensively in his newspaper. Of course he did not always mean what he said: ‘... my hand would wither rather than write another word if I really thought the people were going to do what I tell them to’, he confided to a friend. But even so, he had openly approved of the September
massacres, and may have had more to do with arranging them than Robespierre cared to hear about. The two were not close friends. Marat claimed that the only time they had ever met privately, Robespierre was horrified by his sanguinary attitudes: ‘Robespierre listened to me with terror. He grew pale and silent for some time. This interview confirmed me in
the opinion that I always had of him, that he unites the knowledge of a wise senator to the integrity of a thoroughly good man and the zeal of a true patriot, but that he is lacking as a statesman as regards clearness of vision and determination.”

This was high praise indeed from Marat, who so delighted in defamation. The admiration may not have been mutual,
but it was nevertheless thanks in part to the Incorruptible that as people were being hacked to pieces in the prisons, Marat had been elected to the Convention as a representative for Paris: a flagrant travesty of Rousseau’s ideal law-giver.

As Marat stood up to speak, the hall erupted in hoots of disapproval. When the booing relented he said in
his hollow croaking pantomime villain’s voice: ‘I perceive that I have enemies here.’ ‘All, all, all are your enemies,’ cried his fellow deputies.23 Undeterred, he addressed the charge of tyranny that had been levelled at Robespierre and the other representatives of Paris, whose election the Jacobins had so vigilantly monitored: ‘... I owe it to justice to
declare that my colleagues, and especially Danton and Robespierre, have always opposed the opinions that I avow on this point; I, first and alone, of all public writers in France, have thought of a Dictatorship as the only means to crush the counter-revolutionary traitors.'

A few days later Marat despaired of the Convention in his paper, and prophesied
to the French: ‘Fifty years of anarchy await you, and you will emerge from it only by the power of some dictator who will arise – a true statesman and patriot. Oh prating people, if you did but know how to act!’

Among the crowd at the Tuileries on 10 August was an unemployed army captain who watched with horror as the Swiss Guards were
murdered and burnt. ‘If he had mounted his horse’, the young Napoleon Bonaparte wrote of Louis XVI, ‘victory would’ have remained with him.’

Here was the future statesman and patriot whose dictatorship Marat foretold but did not live to see.

The Girondins’ attacks on Robespierre redoubled. The
old divide at the Jacobins between Brissot and Robespierre was carried over into the Convention, where it mutated into the hostility between the Girondins and the Mountain. But whereas the previous year Robespierre had struggled to win ascendancy over the Paris Jacobins, now he succeeded in having Brissot and his friends formally expelled.
from the club. On 29 October, in the Convention, Mme Roland’s husband denounced in general terms the proponents of violence and blamed the Insurrectionary Commune for the September massacres. Robespierre responded with general refutations, but also asked rhetorically, ‘Who dares accuse me?’ From the seats at the other end of the hall,
where the Girondins were sitting, came a voice. ‘I do,’ called Jean Baptiste Louvet, the licentious novelist married to one of Mme Roland’s close friends. Silence fell among the assembled deputies. According to Dr John Moore (a distinguished medical doctor studying in Paris who had heard a rumour that something exciting was going
to happen that day), Louvet, thin, lank and pale-faced, ‘stalked along the hall like a spectre; and being come directly opposite to the tribune, he fixed Robespierre, and said, “Oui Robespierre, c’est moi qui t’accuse!”’

[“Yes, Robespierre, it is I who accuses you.”]’ Robespierre froze. ‘He could not have seemed more alarmed had a bleeding head
spoken to him from a charger.’ Danton tried to help by causing a distraction – he knew his friend was a skilled yet nervous speaker and could see he was deeply flustered. But Louvet had captured the deputies’ attention and they wanted to hear what he had to say. Realising this, Danton, always so adept, so agile as a public speaker, began to
threaten Louvet before he could even begin: ‘I want the accuser to put his finger into the wound,’ he said, meaning that Louvet must back up his allegations.28 ‘I intend it,’ Louvet replied, ‘but why does Danton scream beforehand?’

In fact, Louvet had nothing new to say. He accused Robespierre of conspiring to control the Insurrectionary Commune, of
complicity in the September massacres, of trying to include Roland and Brissot among the victims, of associating with Marat, and of dominating the Jacobin Club.

I accuse you of having produced yourself as an object of popular idolatry, and of having caused it to be
rumoured that you are the only man capable of saving the country. I accuse you ... of having tyrannised by intrigue and fear over the Electoral Assembly of Paris, and of having aimed at supreme power by calumny, violence, and terror; and I demand that a
Committee be appointed to examine your conduct. 29

It had all been said before, and yet, Dr John Moore observed, this speech stirred up so much hostility against Robespierre that he was in danger of being lynched on the spot. Answer, Danton urged him, answer immediately. But either he
could not or he would not. Once again Danton spoke on his behalf, rejecting the charges of tyranny. Finally Robespierre was given a week to prepare his own response. There was cunning behind his reluctance to speak. He knew he lacked Danton’s fluency and that if the Convention turned against him his career was finished. He knew he could use the
coming week to write and rewrite in his small neat handwriting another finely honed account of his exemplary revolutionary credentials. But there must have been fear as well. Standing there, facing Louvet, resolute as Banquo’s ghost, he completely lost his nerve. He needed the week to recover, to write his defence, and, above all, to assemble
the facts of his revolutionary contribution thus far and square them with his conscience. He was not, he never had been, wrong. Much as he needed others to believe this, what he needed still more was to believe it himself.

Robespierre defended himself before, the Convention on 5 November. On that day Dr Moore was at
the Manège again, in the crowd of people that went early to secure a place in the public galleries. Looking around, he noticed suddenly that the galleries were ‘almost entirely filled with women’. They applauded Robespierre loudly. Dr Moore was not the only person to notice Robespierre’s female fan club. Later that week the Marquis de Condorcet,
secretary to the Academy of Sciences under the Old Regime, now a Girondin deputy in the Convention, raised the subject in the newspaper *Chronique de Paris*:

There are some who ask why there are always so many women around Robespierre: at his
house, in the galleries of the Jacobins and of the Convention. It is because this Revolution of ours is a religion, and Robespierre is leading a sect therein. He is a priest at the head of his worshippers ... Robespierre preaches; Robespierre censures; he is furious, grave,
melancholy, exalted – all coldly; his thoughts flow regularly, his habits are regular; he thunders against the rich and the great; he lives on next to nothing; he has no necessities. He has but one mission – to speak, and he speaks unceasingly; he
creates disciples … he talks of God and of Providence; he calls himself the friend of the humble and the weak; he gets himself followed by women and by the poor in spirit; he gravely receives their adoration … He is a priest, and will never be other than a
priest.\(^{30}\)

Condorcet’s characterisation was ill-intentioned, but there is plenty of other evidence that Robespierre had a peculiar appeal for women. Olympe de Gouges, a butcher’s daughter and pioneering feminist, wrote to him at this time, suggesting they drown themselves together in the Seine as an act
of extreme patriotism: in this way, she suggested, he could cleanse himself of the stains that had sullied his reputation since 10 August.\(^\text{31}\) Robespierre, understandably, preferred to redeem his reputation by more conventional methods.

Before the Convention, he denied outright having played any part in the election of Marat. He confirmed that he
had met him privately only once, in January 1792. At that meeting they had spoken of public affairs and Marat had been despondent. ‘I told him myself what all patriots, even the most ardent, thought of him.’ Robespierre informed the Convention how he reproached Marat for inciting extreme violence in his editorials; calling for five or six hundred guilty heads to be
lopped off was, he insisted, as repugnant to the friends of liberty as to the aristocracy. After ‘that first and unique visit’ he had encountered Marat next in the Convention itself, where he was simply amazed to find himself accused of having schemed to get him elected. There were elements of truth in this retrospective account. Strictly speaking, it was Danton and
the Cordeliers, not Robespierre, who had proposed Marat. But certainly Robespierre had not opposed Marat’s candidature; in fact, he had favoured it. For the benefit of the deputies, cheered on by all those admiring women in the galleries, he was expertly managing the truth, staying as close to it as possible, while massaging it to produce a
particular impression, as all skilled politicians do.

It was when he came to the subject of the September massacres that Robespierre made a truly staggering announcement:

It is certain that one innocent person perished [an alleged victim of mistaken identity]; the numbers
have been exaggerated, but one [innocent], without doubt [perished]. We should weep, citizens, at this cruel mistake, and we have wept over it for a long time. He was said to be a good citizen, and was therefore one of our friends. We should weep also for the
guilty victims, reserved for the vengeance of the laws, who fell beneath the blade of popular justice; but let this grief have an end, like all mortal things. Keep back some tears for more touching calamities; weep instead for the hundred thousand
The kind of comparisons Robespierre calls for in this speech are always morally disturbing. Were the deaths of forty-three frightened children at the Bicêtre reformatory really less moving than the deaths of the many more who never had enough to eat, never had a real hope or start in life under
the Old Regime? Were the deaths of those cornered defenceless priests any less disturbing than the persecutions inflicted on non-believers in the past? Robespierre was defending the Revolution and himself; the two were scarcely distinct in his mind any more. He argued that the end of the Revolution – liberty – justified its means –
bloodshed — and asked a chilling political question, destined to reverberate down the centuries after him: ‘Citizens, do you want a revolution without a revolution?’ To people who complained that the Insurrectionary Commune of 10 August had done illegal things, he replied: ‘The Revolution is illegal: the fall of the Bastille and of the
monarchy were illegal – as illegal as liberty itself!’

There can be little doubt that however much he preferred to distinguish himself publicly from Marat’s tasteless and flamboyant calls for violence, Robespierre was quite prepared to sanction it in practice. He believed violence indispensable for advancing the political experiment on which he had
staked his life. The Girondins were no different. Their fight with Robespierre, Danton and Marat was about who would control the new republic, not whether it was legitimate to use violence in bringing it into existence. Louvet tried to reply to Robespierre’s speech, but this time he was howled down. Dr Moore recorded that another of the deputies, Bertrand Barère, a
suave lawyer from the Midi soon to be known as ‘the Anacreon of the Guillotine’, brought the venomous debate to a close with his incomparable condescension:

It is time to estimate those little undertakers of revolutions at their just value; it is time to give over thinking of
them and their manoeuvres: for my part, I can see neither Syllas nor Cromwells in men of such moderate capacities; and instead of bestowing any more time on them and their intrigues, we ought to turn our attention to the great questions which interest the
republic.  

That night Robespierre’s speech was celebrated in the Jacobin Club as a resounding success. Louvet, unsurprisingly, had been expelled, just like Brissot. The club was now, more than ever, the Incorruptible’s domain. But he could not savour his triumph. He went home, collapsed, and did not
speak in the Convention again until 30 November. He was ill for nearly a month, not in the Duplay household, but in rooms round the corner in the rue Saint-Florentin, to which Charlotte had at last managed to make him move. Why was he ill? His immune system seems to have been weak at the best of times; and this was far from the best of times. The nervous strain of
defending himself in the Convention had clearly taken its toll. Overwork, the approach of winter, the rivalry between his sister and landlady all weighed on him. To make matters worse, Charlotte attempted to conceal Robespierre’s illness from Mme Duplay, judging that ‘his indisposition was nothing serious. He needed a lot of care and I certainly
made sure that he got it.’ When Mme Duplay eventually found out, she was furious and demanded Robespierre’s immediate return to the rue Saint-Honoré. According to Charlotte, he resisted at first, but soon gave in because he did not want to hurt the Duplays’ feelings: ‘They love me so, they have such consideration, such kindness
for me, that it could only be ingratitude on my part to reject them.’ 38 Years later, Charlotte was still complaining that he had sacrificed her feelings to those of Mme Duplay. Evidently she shared his propensity for lasting personal offence, even when none had been intended. For her, as for him, it was the principle that mattered. ‘He
ought not’ to have done it, she says over and over again. While Robespierre’s principles were broader and grander than his sister’s domestic codes of conduct, the tenacity with which each held fast was remarkably similar.

Throughout this period, Robespierre was absent from the Jacobins. By the time he returned to the club,
Mirabeau’s posthumous reputation had been ruined by the dramatic discovery of his secret letters of advice to Louis XVI. The ransacked Tuileries were being renovated as the new home for the Convention, and the letters had been discovered in a locked chest on 20 November. It was 5 December before Robespierre addressed the club on the
subject of its disgraced ex-leader, whose bust still presided over its meetings, and whose remains had been laid to rest with such pomp and ceremony in the Panthéon. At the time of his death the people had wanted Mirabeau eulogised and Robespierre, ‘the organ of the people’, had gone along with it. Now he spoke in support of Duplay’s suggestion that
the bust of Mirabeau should now be removed from the Jacobin hall. His bust in the Manège had already been covered with a black veil, pending the report of a committee investigating the discovery at the Tuileries. The Jacobins were less restrained. They fetched ladders and pulled down the busts of both Mirabeau and the philosopher Helvétius –
who, Robespierre reminded them, had persecuted Rousseau and shown counter-revolutionary tendencies before his time. The busts were smashed and the Jacobins trampled the pieces into the floor – a parody of the civic spirit that had prevailed when they trampled the Champ de Mars to prepare it for the first anniversary of the fall of the
Bastille. The hostile newspaper, the *Patriote français*, reported the incident with some glee: ‘This evening the Jacobins broke the bust of Mirabeau in their hall. It was on Robespierre’s motion that this execution was carried out, just as it was on Robespierre’s motion that Mirabeau was accorded the honours of the Panthéon. This is how demagogues sanctify
popular idols to please worshippers; then break the idols in order to succeed them.’ In response, Robespierre composed a letter to the paper that stands out from the rest of his writings and speeches in being an apology, not a personal defence: ‘I feel remorse today for the first time in my life; for I may have let it be believed that I
shared the good opinion of Mirabeau held by the [National] Assembly and by the general public.’ As apologies go, Robespierre’s was hardly abject. But by his own standards – he was not and never had been wrong – it was remarkable. The fact was that not even he could deny that at the time of Mirabeau’s death only Marat had dared criticise Mirabeau
in public. On 4 April 1791, *L’Ami du Peuple* had declared:

People, give thanks to the gods! Your most redoubtable enemy has fallen beneath the scythe of Fate. Riquetti [Mirabeau] is no more; he dies victim of his numerous treasons,
victim of his too tardy scruples, victim of the barbarous foresight of his atrocious accomplices. Adroit rogues to be found in all circles have sought to play upon your pity, and already duped by their false discourse, you mourn this traitor as the most zealous of your
defenders; they have represented his death as a public calamity, and you bewail him as a hero, as the saviour of your country, who has sacrificed himself for you. Will you always be deaf to the voice of prudence; will you always sacrifice public affairs to your blindness? …
[B]eware of prostituting your incense …

Irresponsible, crazy, disconcerting as ever – still Marat definitely had a gift for prophecy. Robespierre never had his clinical capacity to fearlessly diagnose the pathology of politics. But even now that Marat had been proved so devastatingly right
Mirabeau had been a double-crossing traitor and there were documents to prove it – Robespierre still resisted identifying with him. On 23 December the Jacobins circulated a memorandum to their affiliated societies warning true patriots not to confound Robespierre and Marat. The prudent patriotism, statesmanlike views and superior abilities of
The former were on no account to be confused with the sanguinary gutter journalism of the latter.

The question of putting Louis XVI on trial was first discussed in the Convention on 13 November. Ill though he was, Robespierre made a point of attending. The Convention, determined not
to get sidetracked by another protracted fight between the Mountain and the Girondins, focused the debate on three questions: Can the king be judged? By whom ought he to be judged? And in what respect may he be judged? Charles Morisson, deputy for the Vendée, was the first to speak in defence of the king. He reminded the convention that the constitution of 1791
had declared that ‘the person of the King is inviolable and sacred’. For this reason, he could not be brought to trial:

Citizens, like you I am overcome with the greatest indignation when I consider the many crimes, the atrocities, with which Louis XVI is stained. My first and doubtless
most natural impulse is to see this bloody monster expiate his crimes by the cruellest torments that can be devised. I know that he has earned them all. Yet I must deny my impulse: before this tribunal, representing a free people who seek happiness and
prosperity in acts that are just, in acts that are humane, generous, and kind, because only through such acts can happiness be found, I must deny my impulse, and heed instead the voice of Reason, consult the spirit and the disposition of our law, seek only the interest
of my fellow citizens, for that alone must be the single goal of all our deliberations. 42

Already in his fifties, Morisson, unlike most of his younger colleagues in the Convention, had adult memories of the reigns of two French kings. He had not been a mere schoolboy, like Robespierre and Danton,
when Louis XV died and his grandson was crowned Louis XVI in 1775. It was rumoured that, in his heart, Morisson still believed in the sanctity of kingship. But his argument turned on law, not religion. He could see that, in the circumstances, an appeal to the failed constitution of 1791 was Louis XVI’s best hope.

Immediately after
Morisson, Saint-Just, deputy for Picardy, stepped up to the podium. Twenty-five, handsome, well-dressed and self-confident, Saint-Just had long coveted a more prominent role in the Revolution – and a closer relationship to Robespierre: ‘You whom I know, as I know God, only through his miracles,’ he wrote to him back in 1790. He had tried
to stand for election to the Legislative Assembly in 1791, but was disqualified when the irate father of his young mistress pointed out that at twenty-four he had not yet reached the minimum age to be a deputy. A year later, a year older, he had at last been elected to the Convention. Now he settled himself, drew breath and began his maiden speech. It brought him
I say that the King should be judged as an enemy; that we must not so much judge him as combat him; that as he had no part in the contract which united the French people, the forms of judicial procedure here are not everlasting fame.
to be sought in positive law, but in the law of nations ... Some day men will be astonished that in the eighteenth century humanity was less advanced than in the time of Caesar. Then, a tyrant was slain in the midst of the Senate, with no formality but thirty
dagger blows, with no law but the liberty of Rome. And today, respectfully, we conduct a trial for a man who was the assassin of a people, taken *in flagrante*, his hand soaked with blood, his hand plunged in crime ... Citizens, if the people of Rome, after six
hundred years of virtue and hatred for kings, if Great Britain, after the death of Cromwell, saw kings reborn despite their energy, what must these good citizens among us fear, those who are friends of liberty, seeing the axe tremble in our hands, seeing a people, from
the first day of its liberty, respect the memory of its chains!
... For myself, I can see no mean: this man must reign or die.\textsuperscript{44}

Reign or die: one or the other, Saint-Just insisted, his political logic slicing through Morisson’s legal argument like a freshly sharpened blade. Then – as if he had not
done enough to dazzle posterity or make the Convention swoon – he pronounced the sentence that would never be forgotten: on ne peut point régner innocemment – no one can reign innocently. The king, he repeated at the end of his speech, must be judged as an enemy. He was the murderer of the Bastille, of Nancy, of the Champ de Mars, of the
Tuileries. What enemy had ever done more harm? After he had finished, Saint-Just, very proud and upright, stepped down from the tribune. He walked back to his seat, carrying his head, as Camille Desmoulins scathingly remarked, like a sacred host.

Robespierre was electrified. He demanded to be heard at once, even though
it was not his turn and he was not next on the list of speakers. He would not take no for an answer and caused an unseemly commotion at the tribune. He was asked if it was for or against the king’s inviolability that he wanted so urgently to speak. But he would not give a straight answer, saying only that he proposed to speak ‘on the king’s inviolability’, that he
must address the Convention in the wake of Saint-Just. He did not get his way and the meeting soon adjourned.

By the time the Convention resumed its discussion, the king’s reputation had been even further blackened by the discovery of Mirabeau’s incriminating correspondence in the Tuileries. Meanwhile, Robespierre, re-ensconced at
the Duplays’, was feeling much better. On 3 December a brilliantly incisive speech signalled his complete return to form:

Louis was king, and the Republic is founded. The great question with which you are occupied is settled by this argument: Louis has
been deposed by his crimes. Louis denounced the French people as rebels; to punish them he called upon the arms of his fellow tyrants. Victory and the people have decided that he alone was a rebel. Therefore, Louis cannot be judged; he has already been
condemned, else the Republic is not cleared of guilt. To propose a trial for Louis XVI of any sort is to step backward toward royal and constitutional despotism. Such a proposal is counter-revolutionary since it would bring the Revolution itself
before the court. In fact, if Louis could yet be tried, he might be found innocent ... If Louis is acquitted, where then is the Revolution?\textsuperscript{45}

This was Saint-Just’s argument, recast in Robespierre’s words. Characteristically, he personified the Revolution.
Whereas Saint-Just invoked the law of nations (and the law of nature) with devastating clarity, Robespierre brought it to bear on a fight to the death between the king and the Revolution. On the subject of the death penalty itself, he did not hesitate to remind the Convention that he had spoken against it at length in May 1791. Lest anyone now
accuse him of inconsistency, he explained why the king’s case was different:

Public safety never calls for the death penalty against ordinary citizens because society can always prevent them by other means and render the guilty man incapable of doing
further harm. But a deposed king in the midst of a revolution as yet unsupported by just laws; a king whose very name draws the scourge of war on the restless nation: neither prison or exile can render his existence indifferent to the public welfare … Regretfully I speak
this fatal truth – Louis must die because the nation must live.  

As Robespierre presented it, the execution of the King was to be another manifestation of the people’s revolutionary justice, very different in kind from ordinary legal justice: ‘A people does not judge as does a court of law. It does not hand down sentences, it
hurls down thunderbolts; it does not condemn kings, it plunges them into the abyss; such justice is as compelling as the justice of the courts.’

The justice of the courts had been Robespierre’s whole life before 1789, when he exchanged it for the justice of the people: swift, inexorable, revolutionary. He found both compelling, but he knew too, from personal experience,
that they were incompatible. There could not be a legal revolution, or a revolution without the people’s justice. When he began his new career in Versailles, Robespierre had had plenty of revolutionary instincts, but no theory of revolution to guide them. After three years’ hard learning he was beginning to develop such a theory. ‘Citizens, do you want a
revolution without a revolution?’ he had asked after the September massacres.\textsuperscript{48} Now, at the very end of 1792, he was even clearer and more explicit: any revolution must be a transitional period of struggle on the part of an entire people desiring liberty, but ‘as yet unsupported by just laws’.\textsuperscript{49} To him this was unmistakably what the French Revolution
was. He urged the Convention to execute Louis XVI without further delay, ‘to nourish in the spirit of tyrants a salutary terror of the justice of the people’.

The friendship between Saint-Just and Robespierre was spontaneous, profound and hugely consequential for the Revolution. Beyond the
powerful coincidence of their views on the king’s trial, they shared an obsession with vertu, which can only loosely be translated into English as virtue. Vertu in French has the wider meaning of righteousness and is a public as well as a private good. Robespierre had read a great deal about vertu and its pivotal role in republican governments in the books of
both Montesquieu and his beloved Rousseau. He had mentioned it already in some of his speeches, but the arrival of Saint-Just in Paris brought it to the forefront of his concerns. The two men talked often, and at length. Saint-Just was the only person who dared run straight up the outside staircase into Robespierre’s rooms at the Duplays’ – everyone else
tended to approach his quarters more tentatively, through the house. Saint-Just had about him the allure of a reformed sinner – ‘I have done badly, but I shall be able to do better,’ he said, aged twenty. Five years later, bursting with political talent, ambition and ideals, he renounced his mistress. She followed him to Paris, but he would not open the door to
her. Robespierre must have approved. The two men agreed about Christianity too: the early Christians were austere and full of *vertu*, but things had gone badly wrong ever since. As Saint-Just wrote the year before he was elected to the Convention:

The early Romans, Greeks, and Egyptians were Christians
because they were good and kind, and that is Christianity. Most of those called Christians since the time of Constantine were nothing but savages and madmen. Fanaticism is the work of European priest-craft. A people which has suppressed superstition has made
a great step towards liberty. But it must take great care not to alter its moral principles, for they are the basic law of vertu.\textsuperscript{52}

Robespierre’s fascination with Saint-Just was inevitable. Their unsuccessful joint attempt to stop the king’s trial and have him
immediately executed was just the beginning of an intense revolutionary alliance.

Louis XVI was brought to the Convention for questioning for the first time on 11 December. Inside the tower of the Temple, he and the young Dauphin had been kept on a different floor from the rest of their family since
October. He had been teaching his young son geography and Latin, his own favourite subjects, and had devised a game with maps: an elaborate jigsaw puzzle that required the Dauphin to fit countries back in their right place. When guards came to escort him to the Convention that morning, the king was separated from the Dauphin and only saw his family again
to say goodbye on the eve of his death. At the Convention he was interrogated by the suave deputy Bertrand Barère. Accused, among other things, of deploying troops against the citizens of Paris, he replied: ‘I was the master then and I sought to do what was right.’

Afterwards, in the carriage back to the Temple, he made polite small talk about the
history of the streets through which he passed with the new secretary of the Paris Commune sitting beside him. He had been just as polite in the carriage on the way back from Varennes in April 1791, but now as then it did him little good.

The questioning continued for several days, and then the Convention had to postpone further discussion
of the king’s fate for ten days to give his lawyers a chance to prepare his case. They presented it the day after Christmas, 26 December. Louis XVI was portrayed as a victim of circumstance, not a resolute tyrant, a monarch who had tried to do his best for the people, who had never intended bloodshed. Saint-Just was the first to respond the following day.
Louis tainted vertu; to whom henceforth will it appear innocent? … Some will say that the Revolution is over, that we have nothing more to fear from the tyrant … but citizens, tyranny is like a reed that bends with the wind and which rises again. What do you call a Revolution? The
fall of a throne, a few blows levelled at a few abuses? The moral order is like the physical; abuses disappear for an instant, as the dew dries in the morning, and as it falls again with the night, so the abuses will reappear. The Revolution begins when the tyrant
Saint-Just was already looking to the future. He wanted the king executed so the Revolution, as he understood it, could truly begin. Ultimately, Robespierre was extremely sympathetic to the thorough regeneration of the moral order that Saint-Just envisaged. But for the time
being his own attention was more closely focused on defeating the Girondin deputies, who were demanding a national referendum on the king’s fate. In this way, some of them hoped to save the king’s life; others to diminish the influence of Paris by appeal to the rest of France; all to defeat the Jacobin policy that Robespierre and Saint-Just
had defined. In a long speech on 28 December, Robespierre reminded the Convention of the mistakes the National Assembly had made following the flight to Varennes, when he alone dared argue for the king to be put on trial. He characterised the demand for a referendum as yet another Girondin plot ‘to destroy the work of the people and to rally the
enemies that they vanquished’ on 10 August:

Yes, doubtless there is a plot to degrade the Convention and perhaps to cause its dissolution as a result of this interminable question [of referendum] … This plot thrives among a score of rascals who
abstain above all from announcing an opinion on the question of the last king, but whose silent and pernicious activity causes all the ills which trouble us and prepares all those that await us. 55

To defeat the threatened referendum, Robespierre
drew on a principle of representation that had dominated the Revolution since 1789: there could be no appeal against a body that embodied the sovereign will of the people. The National Assembly in 1789 was such a body, as was the Convention in 1792. The principle was clear enough, but in his fevered exposition of it, Robespierre’s speech became
obscure, his logic hard to follow: ‘The general will is not formed in secret conventicles or round the tables of ministers. The minority retains an inalienable right to make heard the voice of truth, or what it regards as such. Vertu is always in the minority on this earth.’

At this, Marat, who was on the same side but
independent and outspoken always, shouted: ‘All this is nothing but charlatanism!’ Most of the Jacobins were altogether more appreciative of Robespierre’s speech, and two days later the club suspended all other business so he could solemnly read it aloud again. Afterwards he published it in his journal, along with criticisms of his old enemy Brissot. But
Brissot had certainly not given up the fight against the Mountain. As the unofficial leader of the Girondins (who were sometimes even referred to as the Brissotins), he continued proposing measures to diminish the influence of Paris and its delegates over the Convention. He proposed abolishing the permanence of the Paris sections, which,
together with the Jacobins, were the chief support of the Mountain. Robespierre took the tribune in opposition, but could not be heard above shouts of ‘Censure him! Lynch him!’ from the other end of the hall. Once again the Manège resounded with violent remarks, personal abuse flying back and forth between the factions, and in the middle of it all Marat
outdoing himself with contributions euphemistically described in the official minutes as ‘unacademic phrases’. 57 The president rang his bell for order until it broke in his hands. When at last he could make himself heard, he censured everyone: Robespierre, Brissot, Marat, the rest of the Assembly and the public in the galleries too. One observer said the scene
far surpassed a cockfight.\textsuperscript{58} On 14 January the Convention unanimously voted the king guilty. On 15 January the call for a referendum on his fate was defeated by 424 votes to 287; led by Robespierre, all twelve deputies from the department of Paris were against it. On 16 January voting began on the king’s sentence, with each deputy giving his opinion and
explaining his reasons. The session continued all day, all night, all the following day and night, and on into 18 January. An eyewitness said, ‘It is impossible to describe the agitation, even to madness, of that long and convulsive sitting.’

One would naturally suppose that the Convention was a
scene of meditation, silence and a sort of religious terror. Not at all: the end of the hall was transformed into a kind of opera-box, where ladies in charming negligés were eating ices and oranges, drinking liqueurs, receiving the compliments and
salutations of those coming and going. ... on the side of the Mountain, the Duchess Dowager [a relation by marriage of the king], the Amazon of the Jacobin bands, made long ‘Ha-ha’s!’ when she heard the word ‘death’ strongly twang in her ears.
The lofty galleries, assigned to the people during the days that preceded this famous trial, were never empty of strangers and people of every class, who drank wine and brandy as if it had been a tavern. Bets were open at all the neighbouring coffeehouses.
There was such confusion, such variety of opinion as to what the king’s punishment should be, that it was very difficult to collate the results. Of the 721 deputies who voted, at least 361 had to have voted for death for this to be the majority outcome. On the night of 17 January, the president announced that 365 had indeed done so. The next
morning Barrère took over as president (the role was routinely rotated) and revised the figure to only 361 – the barest majority. To this day there is disagreement about the actual figures, but no disagreement at all about the narrowness of the margin that decided Louis XVI’s fate. When someone questioned whether a mere majority was really enough to condemn
him, Danton retorted: ‘You decided the Republic by a mere majority, you changed the whole history of the nation by a mere majority, and now you think the life of one man too great for a mere majority; you say such a vote could not be decisive enough to make blood flow. When I was on the frontier the blood flowed decisively enough.’

Throughout the whole
protracted process, Robespierre worked zealously to ensure the king’s execution. On 16 January, as he was polled for his opinion, he gave what was, by his standards, a short speech advocating death:

I am inflexible in relation to oppressors because I am compassionate toward
the oppressed; I do not recognise the humanity that butchers the people and pardons despots. The sentiment that led me to demand, in vain, in the National Assembly, the abolition of the death penalty, is the same as that forcing me today to demand that it is
applied to the tyrant of my fatherland, and the King in person. 

It was not enough for him to argue that Louis XVI was an exception to the general case he had made against capital punishment; Robespierre, for the sake of his own sense of perfect consistency, had to go a step further and argue that the same principle
underpinned his two conflicting opinions.

The following morning, before the first count of the votes, the Convention received a letter from the king’s lawyers, asking to be heard again. Danton said yes, after the result was known. Robespierre said no, the Convention should proceed straight to other business: ‘Never when an accused
person is definitively condemned do his defenders have the right to an extension; I demand the order of the day.’ After the result was known later that day, he spoke again, insisting there must be no further appeal beyond the Convention: ‘The nation has condemned the King who oppressed it, not simply to execute a great act of vengeance; it has
condemned him to give a great example to the world, to affirm French liberty, to evoke liberty in Europe, and, above all, to affirm among you public tranquillity.’

After this, the only hope for the king was a reprieve, or postponement of his sentence. For twenty-four hours the Girondin leaders tried to save him this way – tried also to secure their own victory over
the Jacobin faction. Robespierre intervened three times to make sure they did not succeed. On the night of 19 January, he led the Paris deputies in voting against the reprieve, and it was defeated, 380 votes to 310. In the circumstances, seventy votes was a narrow enough margin to mean that, without Robespierre’s special exertions, Louis XVI might
have lived. Robespierre fought for the king’s death with a religious solemnity that had nothing in common with the ribald vulgarity of the brandy-swilling public in the galleries. It is true that he was backed all the way by the radical Paris sections, backed in their turn by revolutionaries throughout France. But his sensibility was all his own. The evening
before the execution, scheduled to occur as soon as possible on 21 January, Robespierre told the Jacobins to present in the morning ‘a calm demeanour, so dignified and formidable that it will freeze with fear the enemies of freedom’. The Girondin Condorcet had been absolutely right to identify Robespierre as the high priest of revolution.
Louis XVI’s chief lawyer was M. de Malesherbes, the great-grandfather of Alexis de Tocqueville, who would write one day of the inevitable progress of equality and democracy in France (and America) that Robespierre, in advance of his time, fought for with such passion. After the Convention had counted and recounted its votes, Malesherbes ascended the
narrow winding stairs of the Temple tower to tell the king he must die. Halfway through their interview he broke down and fell weeping on the floor. Recovering himself he said, ‘But Sire, these wretches are not yet our masters, and every honest man will endeavour to save your Majesty, or to die at your feet.’ The king replied, ‘M. de Malesherbes, such proceedings would
involve a great many persons, and would incite a civil war in Paris. I had rather die. You will therefore, I entreat of you, command them from me to make no effort to save me – the King of France never dies! ’

‘The king is dead! Long live the king!’ This famous cry had echoed through the centuries down the long line of French monarchs, marking
the times when they passed the crown uninterruptedly one to another: to Louis XVI from his grandfather Louis XV, to him from the Sun King Louis XIV, to him from Louis XIII, the successor of Henry IV, the first of the Bourbon branch of the Capetian dynasty founded by Hugues Capet in 987 after the demise of Frankish power.\(^{65}\) It was this cry that still sustained the
last of their line when he learnt that, like none of his predecessors, he was to die on the scaffold. He saw his family for the final time on the evening of Sunday 20 January, told his son never to think of avenging his death, and gave both his children his blessing. Marie Antoinette wanted the family to stay together all night, but the king needed to be alone with
his priest. He told his wife he would see her again in the morning – the tenderest of marital white lies, for he knew he could not stand to confront her grief on his way to his execution. After they left, he asked the guards not to permit his family to return. He spent until midnight with the abbé Henry Essex Edgeworth de Firmont, a Roman Catholic priest of
Irish provenance whom he had specially requested.

He was awoken by drums outside at 5 a.m. The priest said Mass and administered Holy Communion. On his way to execution, Louis XVI read more prayers, the special ones for those at the point of death. He wanted to address the people from the scaffold, but the drums beat loud to prevent him. He was asked to
remove his coat and resisted at first – surely they could execute him as he was? When it was explained that the collar of his coat might obstruct the blade of the guillotine, he consented and removed it himself. Then they wanted to tie his hands. Again he resisted – surely that gratuitous humiliation was unnecessary? The abbé Edgeworth helped him by
reminding him that Christ’s hands had been tied at the crucifixion. He helped him again by proclaiming as the blade fell: ‘Son of St Louis, ascend to heaven!’ The executioner showed the king’s head to the people. Some of them surged forward to dip handkerchiefs or pieces of paper in his blood. One was inspired to mimic a priest blessing the congregation
with holy oil:

One citizen got up to the guillotine itself, and, plunging his whole arm into the blood of Capet, of which a great quantity remained, he took up handfuls of the clotted gore, and sprinkled it over the crowd below, which pressed round
the scaffold, each anxious to receive a drop on his forehead. ‘Friends,’ said this citizen, in sprinkling them, ‘we were threatened that the blood of Louis should be on our heads; and so you see it is!’

Alone in her room, Marie Antoinette had not slept, had
not even undressed for bed. At 6.15 a.m. guards had come, to take her to the king she thought, but they were only looking for a prayer book for the king’s last Mass. She had waited all morning, still thinking she would see him again, until shouts of joy from the crowd below told her he was dead. Hearing the jubilant cries, Marie Antoinette stood like a statue
in a state of silent, choking agony. When at last she roused herself, she asked to see one of the men who had been in the king’s rooms until he was taken away. This man gave her back the king’s wedding ring with a message – he would never have parted with it but with his life. She turned it over in her hand. Inside it was engraved: M.A.A.A. 19 Aprille 1770.
Marie Antoinette, Archduchess of Austria, had married the heir to the French throne twenty-three years earlier. Now she had to ask his executioners’ permission to wear mourning.

Robespierre had breakfast as usual that day with the Duplays. Élisabeth, the youngest of the daughters, to whom he was always so kind, asked him why there were so
many people out in the street at that early hour. He told her something was happening that she should not see, and asked one of the household servants to go and shut the great outer door that opened from the carpenter’s courtyard on to the rue Saint-Honoré. Later in the morning, Louis XVI passed that closed door with his priest, guards and a vast silent crowd of the
French people. It was in the name of those people that the king was guillotined, just around the corner from the Duplays’, on what had once been the Place Louis XV and was now the Place de la Révolution. Robespierre had counselled solemnity to the Jacobins. He was solemn himself that morning: he turned his back on the public spectacle that he had
persuaded the Convention was indispensable for the future of the Republic, but which he did not, himself, care to witness.
Part V

The Terror

(1793–1794)
The Pact with Violence
execution spread like a stain across Europe. In England, Prime Minister Pitt pronounced it ‘The foulest and most atrocious deed which the history of the world has yet had occasion to attest.’¹ In Russia Catherine the Great, shocked and grieving, took to her bed and decreed six weeks’ mourning for her whole court. Spain immediately recalled her
ambassador. Public opinion in all these countries turned unremittingly against the Revolution. The reaction in America was more ambivalent: distant support for the embattled new republic, mingled with sorrow for its regal victim, who, in his time, had supported the colonists in their struggle to found their own modern republican
government on the other side of the Atlantic. ‘As Americans we regret the loss of the life of the King,’ wrote the religious minister and diarist William Bentley, ‘but we remember the liberties of mankind are dearer than any life whatever.’

The regicide transformed the war. By November 1792, after the battle of Valmy and one subsequent victory at
Jemmappes, French forces had overrun the entire Austrian Netherlands. French armies in the south and on the Rhine were also advancing the new republic’s borders. Brissot’s vision of a proselytising war to consolidate the Revolution by carrying it abroad seemed realised, and the Convention promised to ‘accord fraternity and help to all peoples who
wish to recover their liberty’. It also demanded that the territories it ‘liberated’ contribute to the cost of France’s conquests. Danton went on mission to the armies in the Austrian Netherlands in December 1792, and saw blood flowing freely at the front line. He declared that: ‘The limits of France are marked out by nature. We shall reach them at their four
points; at the Ocean, at the Rhine, at the Alps, at the Pyrenees.’ This meant that Belgium would have to be incorporated into France.

Ten days after Louis XVI’s execution, the Convention declared war on England and the Dutch Republic. This was a pre-emptive strike, since Prime Minister Pitt had already cleared funds with parliament
for war against a country prepared to murder its king, and the Dutch Republic, situated between France and the Rhine, was also preparing for war. In March war was declared on Spain also. Danton – who had rung the tocsin and roused the people to fight before Valmy – left again on mission to the army in the north, this time burdened by concern for his
gravely ill wife Gabrielle, whom he had once wooed romantically in Italian and still deeply loved. He arrived in Belgium, demanding its annexation to France, on 3 February and began the return journey to Paris on the 15th. He got back to a cold, empty house: no fire, no children and no wife. In his absence, Gabrielle had died and the children had been taken to
their grandmother. Danton went straight to the graveyard and dug Gabrielle’s coffin out of the dank earth in which she had been lying for four days. He prised off the lid to hold her and see her face one last time. He summoned a sculptor to the grisly scene and commissioned not a death mask but a bust of the lifeless woman. Then he went home to the letter from
Robespierre that said, ‘I love you more than ever, I love you until death. At this moment, I am you.’

His mind macabre and full of battlefields, his heart ravaged by grief, his eyes distracted by hungry, rioting, destitute Parisians, and his ears ringing with reports of the royalist and Catholic revolt in the provinces, Danton now did something
for which a year later he would beg forgiveness at the foot of the guillotine. He persuaded the Convention to revive the Revolutionary Tribunal, with its extraordinary powers to condemn people to death (the Convention had disbanded the Revolution’s first extraordinary tribunal at the start of the king’s trial). Now Robespierre fully supported
Danton’s call for its re-establishment and further proposed that capital punishment should be applied to counter-revolutionary acts of any kind directed ‘against the security of the state, or the liberty, equality, unity and indivisibility of the Republic’. A majority of the Convention deputies opposed the reconstitution of the Tribunal. After long debate,
the project was nearly abandoned when, towards midnight, Danton hastened to the tribune. Speaking ominously in the candlelight, he warned his exhausted colleagues that there was no longer any alternative to the Tribunal, except a bloodbath in the streets. This was not a strong but a desperate argument. During its first incarnation, at Robespierre’s...
instigation after 10 August 1792, the Tribunal had done nothing to prevent the September massacres; what reason was there to believe it could – or would – prevent further bloodshed by resuming its summary powers over life and death? Danton saw the Tribunal as an overwhelmingly powerful weapon in the hands of the government, the last hope for
restoring order in a starving, anarchic country rent by civil strife and foreign war. He never expected it would be used against himself, but on the scaffold before his execution he said: ‘This time twelve month I proposed that infamous Tribunal by which we die, and for which I beg pardon of God and man.’

The Convention agreed to the Revolutionary Tribunal
on 10 March. It consisted of twelve jurors, a public prosecutor (Antoine Fouquier-Tinville) and two substitutes; there could be no appeal against its judgements. By law the Paris sections should have elected the members of the Tribunal, who officiated wearing dark clothes and with black plumes in their hats, but this never happened. Instead, the
Commune chose them. At Fouquier-Tinville’s own trial (in 1795, after the fall of Robespierre) it emerged that many of the jurors on the Tribunal had been unable to read or write, and were often drunk.

On the evening of 9 March, armed bands had marauded through Paris smashing the print shops that produced the Girondin
The Girondins were hated in Paris for trying to diminish the city’s role in the Revolution. The next day, the mob attempted to impose its will on the Convention through another insurrection. The city gates were closed. The tocsin was rung. Disaffected Parisians demanded the arrest of all suspect army generals and ministers, and all the leading
Girondin deputies. Even more radical than the sans-culottes, these petitioners wanted a ‘maximum’ price imposed on basic commodities that were increasingly difficult to obtain due to the economic strains of war and rapid inflation. Conditions in Paris were deteriorating rapidly – recently there had been a wave of attacks on grocery shops and warehouses. The
Girondins blamed Marat for inciting such violence, but the Jacobins and the Mountain deputies distanced themselves from it, referring to the radical petitioners as rabid *enragés*. There is no evidence that Robespierre wanted or approved of the new insurrection, and the Commune decided not to support it. The National Guard was instructed to
maintain order, and the insurgent *enragés* failed in their objectives on 10 March. Meanwhile, the news from the front line got worse. The French were struggling. The day after Danton left for Paris, the invasion of Holland began. At first all went according to plan, but then at the battle of Neerwinden on 18 March, French troops under the command of
General Dumouriez, the hero of the battle of Valmy, were routed by the enemy and fled headlong from the field. Holland had not been conquered and now Belgium was almost lost. By this point, Dumouriez felt little more sympathy with the Girondin or Jacobin factions than General Lafayette had before him. Unlike Lafayette, Dumouriez had had
allegiances with both factions in the past, and had accepted the destruction of the monarchy on 10 August. But he remained a royalist at heart, and threatened now to march back to the capital and preside over a regency for Louis XVI’s son, who was currently ailing in the Temple tower. Amid the panic in Paris, the Convention decided to set up surveillance
committees (comités de surveillance) in every commune throughout the country to scrutinise the activities of foreigners and suspects.⁹

Soon after the fiasco of Neerwinden, Danton set off to the army for a third time, to meet with Dumouriez and attempt to reconcile him to the republican government. His mission was not
successful and he was back in Paris when Dumouriez finally deserted to the Austrians at the beginning of April. The time had come to put the new weapon of the Revolutionary Tribunal into hands capable of wielding it, and to this end Danton, again speaking dramatically by candlelight at midnight, urged the Convention to create the Committee of Public Safety –
a provisional revolutionary government briefed to supervise and accelerate the exercise of ministerial power. When the Convention had first met in September 1792 it had established a Committee of General Security with extensive policing responsibilities. But now a smaller, more dynamic executive committee was called for, not to replace the
Committee of General Security, but to work alongside it. Over time the relationship between the two committees, both of them formally responsible to the Convention, became extremely fraught. Nine of the deputies were chosen for the new Committee of Public Safety, whose members had to be re-elected every month. Danton was one of them. The
others were: Bertrand Barère, Jean Delmas, Jean Bréard, Pierre Joseph Cambon, Louis Guyton, Jean-Baptiste Treilhad, Jean Delacroix and Jean Lindet. Significantly, none were Girondins, who opposed the creation of such a committee, fearing in advance that they would be excluded from it. And so the factional fight that had begun when Robespierre first
opposed Brissot’s war policy at the end of 1791 entered its last phase with the Girondins at a serious disadvantage. They had failed to save the king, failed to prevent the resurrection of the Revolutionary Tribunal, and failed to avert the Committee of Public Safety. These three failures together were soon to lead to the deaths of Brissot, of twenty more of his
colleagues in the Convention, and of Mme Roland, who once pored over a map of France imagining how it might be divided.

The new republic urgently needed a bigger army if it was going to recover from recent defeats and win the foreign war. To provide recruits the Convention resorted to conscription – the Levy of Three Hundred
Thousand – and decreed a quota for each of the eighty-three departments: if there were not enough volunteers, unwilling men were to be drafted by drawing lots. At this, the discontent in the Vendée (an especially religious region south of Brittany) escalated into horrifying civil war. The practice of sending ‘representatives-on-mission’
had begun earlier in the year when the Convention had dispatched some of its members to visit and report on the provinces, but now, in the hands of the new Committee of Public Safety, and with the outbreak of civil war, these representatives were invested with new repressive powers. Personally entrusted with the exercise of sovereign authority, they
were sent out in pairs to designated departments to oversee the levy, mandated to do whatever was necessary to ensure its success. In theory their purpose was to strengthen the republic’s centralised government, but in practice the Committee of Public Safety found it hard to control its own representatives who, in some cases, deviated sharply from
official policies, imposing extraordinary taxes, raising private armies, and committing shameful acts of spoliation, violation and murder. Another emergency measure that would prove hard to control over time was Danton’s suggestion for a Revolutionary Army of sans-culottes to go out into the countryside and requisition grain and other food supplies.
At this time Robespierre was more publicly hysterical than ever, obsessed with death, convinced he was about to be assassinated, and constantly offering himself for martyrdom, as though that would resolve any of the Revolution’s problems. Fear most the enemy within, he warned the Jacobins again, the most dangerous traitors were not on the front line, but
mingling in disguise among the patriots in Paris. The time had come to choose between slavery and death – ‘We know how to die, and we will all die,’ he announced triumphantly at the end of a speech on 13 March.¹² ‘All! All!’ echoed voices round the hall. Then Marat stood up and said, ‘No! We are not going to die; we will give death to our enemies, we will erase
them!’ 13 Two weeks later, Robespierre had imbibed some of Marat’s fighting spirit. Speaking again at the Jacobins on the dangers menacing France, and the vigorous measures required to combat them, he asked: ‘Must we despair of the safety of the Republic? No! Tyrants unmasked are nothing. The French people are only betrayed because they want to
be; the French people are stronger than all their enemies. One republican who knows how to die can exterminate all the despots.’

Such flamboyance went down well with his audience, who applauded vigorously, but in itself it hardly amounted to a strategy for saving the Revolution. Yet Robespierre had such a strategy: one that converged with Danton’s. He
too wanted a strong government, an end to the separation of power between the legislature and the executive, in this time of crisis. But here even the Jacobins thought Robespierre had gone too far, while the Girondins accused him of aspiring to dictatorship. He retorted by denying even that he wanted to become a minister – at this someone in
the Convention laughed openly. \(^{15}\) When news of Dumouriez’s treachery reached Paris, Robespierre seized on yet another weapon in the fight with the Girondins, and strove to implicate his former friends Brissot, Pétion and their associates in the general’s spectacular betrayal of France. His move was both
aggressive and self-defensive. The Girondins would happily have held Dumouriez against Robespierre, Danton and the rest of the Jacobins if they could, and questions were already being asked as to why, when Danton went to the army a third time and met with Dumouriez, he had failed to denounce him as a traitor. Robespierre was exposed too, for just weeks
earlier he had publicly expressed full confidence in Dumouriez and his command of the foreign war. Characteristically, he did not say he had been wrong. Instead he deftly reworked the reasons he had given for trusting Dumouriez so that, in retrospect, they sounded far more conditional and sceptical than they had at the time. Simultaneously he
insisted, over and over again, that Dumouriez had been collaborating with Brissot – surely the time had come at last to take action against the man responsible for plunging the country into a disastrous war well over a year ago? ‘Dumouriez and Brissot were the first apostles of the war,’ he told the Convention, bending the facts to his advantage.\footnote{16} As ever, he
spoke of plots and hidden enemies. ‘If you wish, I will raise a corner of the veil,’ he tantalised his colleagues. ‘Raise it all!’ they pleaded.

This time the conspiracy Robespierre outlined had international components: it connected British Prime Minister Pitt with General Dumouriez, the Girondin faction, property-owners in France fearful for their assets,
and the nobility hoping to recover their Old Regime privileges. Conspiracy on this scale was a figment of Robespierre’s fevered imagination. Yet he was absolutely correct to identify private property as the new focus of contention in the Revolution. The Girondins envisaged a republic with strong protection for private property and differences in
the personal wealth of individual citizens. The Jacobins, led by Robespierre, distanced themselves from the radical demands of the enragés, but nevertheless proposed limits to private property in the interests of the people, the majority of whom were poor. Robespierre declared that:

All the ambitious
persons who have appeared until now in the theatre of the Revolution, have had this in common: they defend the rights of the people for only as long as seems necessary. All have regarded them [the people] as a stupid flock, destined to be led by the most able
or the strongest. All have regarded representative assemblies as bodies composed of men either greedy or credulous, who can be corrupted or tricked into serving their criminal projects.¹⁷

His fight against the Girondins here emerges as
more than personal enmity for Brissot, who had successfully defeated his passionate crusade against the war. More too than hatred for Pétion, formerly his closest radical colleague, who had been — as Robespierre saw it — corrupted by power and public office. Beyond all such considerations lay Robespierre’s perception that the Girondins were not as
sincerely, thoroughly, uncompromisingly for the people as he was himself. If he was deceived in this – and there is plenty of evidence to suggest that he was not – the very least that can be said in his defence is that he genuinely believed he had committed himself to the people, the poor especially, and was acting accordingly to save their Revolution for
them.

Disadvantaged as they now were, the Girondins nonetheless fought on. They turned on Marat, the most outspoken and provocative of all the Jacobins, whose newspaper was now emblazoned with the motto: ‘Let us tax the rich to subsidise the poor.’\textsuperscript{18} In early April, the Girondin Marguérite-Élie Guadet
denounced Marat to his fellow deputies. He was arrested, pending an investigation into the charges against him. Robespierre, reporting these events to the Jacobins, claimed that the move against Marat was a further development in the insidious counter-revolutionary plot he had just unveiled. Guadet had ‘exhaled the poison of an
impure soul’; he had called for the seizure of Jacobin and Cordeliers newspapers and an end to the permanence of the Paris sections. But despite these attacks, Robespierre appealed for calm and cautioned the Jacobins against an uprising that would only play into their enemies’ hands and be held against them in the provinces, where the Girondins had formidable
influence. He was far from calm himself, though. On 12 April he thundered from the tribune, ‘I demand censure of those who protect traitors.’

‘Bravo, bravo,’ shouted Marat. At this Pétion rose to speak, but before he could do so Robespierre added, ‘And their accomplices.’ Pétion retorted, ‘Yes, their accomplices, and you yourself. It is time at last to
end all this infamy; it is time that traitors and perpetrators of calumny carried their heads to the scaffold; and here I take it upon myself to pursue them to death.’ ‘Stick to the facts,’ said Robespierre. ‘It is you whom I will pursue,’ returned Pétion (as though anyone were in doubt). At these open menaces there was uproar. Then the painter David ran
into the middle of the hall, ripped open his shirt and pointing to his bare breast cried, ‘Strike here! I propose my own assassination! I too am a man of virtue! Liberty will win in the end!’

Madness reigned in the Manège.

The next day, the deputies heard the report against Marat. It proposed his indictment for ‘pillage,
murder and attempting to dissolve the Convention’. They voted 226 in favour of indictment and 93 against (forty-eight deputies were absent, three refused to vote and seven asked for an adjournment). The new Revolutionary Tribunal awaited Marat. It met inside the Palais de Justice above the Conciergerie dungeon on the small island in the Seine
at the centre of Paris. It used the same great room that the Paris Parlement had used before 1789, but the tapestries had been stripped from the walls, the royal fleurs-de-lis carpet rolled up, and the king’s throne and Dürer’s painting of Christ removed. Instead there were wooden tables, chairs and platforms for the judges, jury, prisoners and members of the public.
Prisoners were interrogated and allowed to prepare their defence. In Marat’s case this was hardly necessary. His Jacobin colleagues on the Tribunal not only acquitted him, but also crowned him with civic garlands. Marat was carried into the street on the shoulders of a jubilant crowd, who took him straight back to the Convention, where he mounted the tribune
again. He was determined on revenge against the Girondins. ‘I propose that the Convention shall decree complete freedom in the expression of opinion, so that I may send to the scaffold the faction that voted for my impeachment,’ he said soon afterwards.  

The Paris sections, for their part, sought to avenge Marat by demanding that the
Convention expel twenty-two of its leading Girondin deputies. When they presented their petition on 15 April, a Girondin named Boyer-Fonfrède, who had not been included among the twenty-two, rushed to the tribune asking to be added to the list. Cries of ‘Include us all! All! All!’ echoed round the volatile debating chamber, and a crowd of
deputies grouped themselves round the twenty-two, bodily pledging solidarity with the Girondins. Two weeks later, supporters of the Girondins took to the streets, marching and shouting, ‘Long live the law! Down with the Mountain!’ In the Convention the Girondins now attacked the Commune, hoping in this way to undermine the support it had provided for the
Jacobins since the insurrection that brought down the monarchy. Robespierre retaliated by claiming that the Girondin supporters had actually cried, ‘Long live the King! Down with the Republic!’ The Girondin Maximin Isnard was moved to point out that the French words for law and king (loi and roi) could easily be mistaken for one another.
Robespierre ignored this smart remark and went on to defend Paris against its critics in the Convention and the provinces. Reporting his own speech afterwards to the Jacobins he said:

I demanded that the factions in the Convention cease to slander the people of Paris, and that the
journalists who pervert public opinion be reduced to silence … I demanded that the people make an effort to exterminate the aristocrats who are everywhere [loud applause] … I demanded the existence in the heart of Paris of an army, not that of
Dumouriez, but a popular army composed of sans-culottes perpetually armed against Feuillants and moderates. I demand the allocation of sufficient funds to arm the artisans, all the good patriots ... I demand that tomorrow forges be
erected in all public squares to make weapons for arming the people ... I demand that the constituted authorities oversee the execution of these measures, and not forget that they are the delegates of a city that is the boulevard of liberty whose existence
renders the counter-revolution impossible.\textsuperscript{25}

In quieter times Robespierre had stalwartly defended the freedom of the press, but no longer. Here he condoned the smashing of the Girondin print shops that more violent, less articulate men than himself had already undertaken in March. At the
climax of his hour-long speech he told the Jacobins that in the current crisis only the most vigorous measures could save France. If they failed, virtue would vanish from the face of the earth. It was time to see if the Jacobins truly wanted to save the human race. The club leapt to its feet, waving hats in the air and crying, ‘Yes! Yes! We want to!’ Two days
later, at the end of a shorter intervention, Robespierre confessed to extreme fatigue and ended with, ‘I have nothing more to say to you, and I have decided that, unless there is a revival of public spirit, unless the patriots make one last effort, I will wait in the chair of senatorial office, to which the people have raised me, for the daggers of the counter-
On 11 May, the sections of Paris petitioned the Convention again, still demanding the expulsion of the Girondin deputies. In reply, Isnard, a notorious hard drinker who may already have been intoxicated even though it was still early in the day, made an extremely impolitic speech:
If ever the Convention were insulted [interruptions] – if ever by one of those insurrections which since the 10 March have been so unceasingly repeated [violent interruptions] – if by these incessant insurrections – any attack should be made on the national
representatives, I tell you, in the name of all France [loud negatives] – I tell you, I repeat, in the name of all France, that Paris would be annihilated [general tumult] – the traveller will seek along the shores of the Seine whether Paris had ever existed.\textsuperscript{27}
The last person to utter a threat of this kind against Paris had been the Duke of Brunswick in his ill-judged manifesto of July 1792. Then the Jacobins had laughed. This time they knew at once that their lives were in danger: they had staked everything on Paris and entered a pact with the violence of its people. The suggestion that the city might
be obliterated reinforced the call to arms Robespierre had recently uttered before collapsing exhausted into his chair.

The insurrection that Isnard had condemned in advance occurred on 31 May. A great crowd of Parisian petitioners arrived at the Convention, which had recently moved from the Manège to a new chamber in
the revamped Tuileries palace. The crowd entered the chamber and took possession of the deputies’ seats. The Girondins protested and tried to end the session by leaving it. They returned when they saw their attempt had failed. Robespierre stepped up to the tribune and supported the petitioners’ demands. ‘Conclude then,’ shouted one of the Girondins impatiently.
‘Yes, I shall conclude, and do so against you,’ he replied bitterly:

against you who, after the revolution of 10 August wanted to bring to the scaffold those who had accomplished it; against you who have never ceased to provoke the
destruction of Paris; against you who wanted to save the tyrant; against you who conspired with Dumouriez; against you who have rabidly pursued the same patriots whose heads Dumouriez demanded [the Jacobins]; against you whose criminal vengeance has
provoked the same cries of indignation that you want to proscribe in those who are your victims. Ah yes! My conclusion is the decree of accusation against all the accomplices of Dumouriez and all those whom the petitioners have designated.
His vehemence was vigorously applauded. But once again it had shattered him: ‘I am no longer capable of prescribing to the people the means of its salvation. It is a task beyond any single man’s powers – certainly beyond mine, exhausted as I am by four years of revolution, and by the heartrending spectacle of the triumph of tyranny, and of all
that is most vile and corrupt.’ There followed two further days of insurrection, during which Robespierre probably collapsed in bed whilst Marat, despite his debilitating skin disease, climbed the tower of the Hôtel de Ville and rang the tocsin with his own hand. On 2 June the Girondin leaders who had not already fled were provisionally
arrested. François Hanriot, a former customs clerk promoted to commander of the National Guard, played a crucial part in these events. He realised that control of Paris depended on street fighting, and to this end concentrated on deploying small four-pound-grapeshot-firing cannons, which he ordered to surround the Convention. In this way the
intimidated deputies were forced to give in to the demands of the capital and expel the Girondins.

Mme Roland’s husband was one of the Girondins who was able to flee in time, but she herself had no intention of doing so. In the early evening she went to the Tuileries and was surprised to find that all the deputies had already gone home.
Imagine this! A day of insurrection, when the sound of the tocsin had scarcely ceased to rend the air, when two hours previously 40,000 armed men had surrounded the Convention and petitioners were threatening members at the bar of the house. Why was the
Convention not in permanent session? Had it then been entirely subjugated and agreed to do all that it was told? Was the revolutionary power now so mighty that the Convention dare not oppose it? ‘Citizens.’ I said to a bunch of sans-culottes standing around a
cannon, ‘did everything pass off well?’ ‘Marvellous well’, they replied.  

Later that night she was arrested and imprisoned in the Abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Près, the scene of the first of the September massacres, she grimly noted as she passed through the door.
In the midst of this intractable factional strife between the Jacobins and Girondins, the Convention tried to agree France’s new republican constitution. The Constitutional Committee that had been set up after the fall of the monarchy included the abbé Sieyès, still hoping to realise his elaborate theory of representative republican government, Condorcet, who
had called openly for a republic in 1791, long before Robespierre dared to, and others who were loosely associated with the Girondins. On 15 April the Convention declared discussion of the constitution open and dedicated three days a week to it until it was completed. Robespierre at once intervened, insisting, against those who wanted to
get on with designing the government straight away, that the constitution must begin with a new declaration of rights, which improved on both the American example and the flawed declaration of 1789. Abstract principles were his favourite subject and as usual he spoke at length, only breaking off to remark irritably, ‘It is impossible for me to speak in the middle of
these interruptions and sarcastic remarks!’ A few days later, when the discussion of specific rights began, he had this to say on the freedom of the press:

Revolutions are made to establish the rights of man. Therefore, in the interests of these rights, it is necessary to take all measures
required for the success of such revolutions ... the revolutionary interest might require the repression of a conspiracy founded on the liberty of the press ... I declare that laws expressly made for the Revolution are necessary, even if they are contrary to
the freedom of the press.\textsuperscript{32}

Thus the very same rights sought and promised by the Revolution could also be suspended, if necessary, in the Revolution’s cause. Rather than hypocrisy, these views signalled a new and dangerous political pragmatism on Robespierre’s part.
When discussion turned to the right to property – which had been enshrined in the declaration of 1789 alongside life and liberty – Robespierre revealed the depth of his commitment to the poor. He was not a communist before his time. He did not oppose the very existence of private property, and he deliberately distanced himself from any suggestion
that the Roman *loi agraire* might be revived in revolutionary France by placing the means of subsistence in the hands of the people. ‘Don’t worry, I don’t want to touch your treasures, however impure their source,’ he sneeringly reassured the rich.\(^{33}\) He thought making poverty honourable more important (and more practicable) than
proscribing wealth. He did nevertheless go on to propose some very definite restrictions on the right to property: ‘The right to property is limited, like all others, by the obligation to respect the rights of others.’ Most significantly he called for progressive taxation, a policy that followed directly from Marat’s exhortation: ‘Let us tax the rich to
subsidise the poor.’ It was for this that he was eviscerated in the hostile press. ‘Robespierre consecrated the principle of progressive taxation, an absurd tax, destructive of equality, a tax ruinous to industry, that would impede the sale of national property [confiscated from the Church and émigrés],’ complained the Girondin paper the Patriote
français, still in circulation despite recent curbs on the freedom of the press and violence towards the Girondin print shops. While the Girondins envisaged a modern republic secured on free market economics, Robespierre urged redistributive measures that would make a real difference to the lives of the poor. After four years of revolutionary
upheaval in a country that always had difficulty feeding itself, at a time when many in Paris and throughout the provinces were rioting for food, Robespierre’s policy had more appeal. As he put it, ‘The first social law is therefore that which guarantees the means of existence to all the members of society; all other [laws] are subordinate to this one;
property is only instituted or guaranteed to affirm it … It is not true that property can ever be held in opposition to man’s subsistence:

In other words, if the people were starving they had a right to eat, regardless of who owned the food. This was a very old, respectable view, rooted in long traditions of political thought in Europe; in espousing it, Robespierre was
drawing on the theoretical resources of his excellent education.  

Because the strife between the Jacobins and Girondins had entered so deeply into the Convention’s constitutional debates – delaying and distorting them – when the Jacobins finally triumphed at the beginning of June they appointed a new committee, including
Robespierre’s close friends Saint-Just and Couthon, to redraft the republican constitution. This time the Convention set aside every afternoon to discuss it. France had been without a constitution for almost a year: people were becoming impatient with the protracted process of procuring one. With lightning speed, the Jacobins had a draft on 10
June. ‘The Constitution of 1793, like the world itself, was created in six days,’ scoffed the historian Michelet. It established universal male suffrage (which had seemed merely an eccentric political pipe dream when Robespierre demanded it three years earlier). The reworked Declaration of Rights made exciting new promises: welfare assistance
for citizens in need and state education for all. (Robespierre had advocated both measures.) Although the new draft did not limit the right to property, Robespierre professed to be delighted: ‘All Europe will be constrained to admire this fine monument of human reason, and of the sovereignty of a great people.’\(^{38}\) Europe was not currently disposed to
admire France. Yet it was true that this was the most democratic constitution the modern world had seen. It was duly ratified by referendum in primary assemblies throughout the country: 1,801,918 voted for it and only 11,610 against. The majority was overwhelming, but in this time of civil war the electoral turnout was low: only about a
quarter of those qualified to vote cared to do so.

Meanwhile, the so-called ‘federalist’ revolt against the direction the Revolution had taken in Paris spread south through the country from the town of Caen in Calvados, to Bordeaux, Bourges, Lyon, Toulouse, Nîmes, Marseille and Toulon. By mid-June, sixty of France’s eighty-three departments were in open
rebellion against Paris. No sooner did the new constitution come into existence than it had to be suspended. There were people in the capital who wanted – and needed – it out of the way. Saint-Just explained to the Convention:

Your Committee of Public Safety has weighed the causes of
our public misfortunes, and found them in the weakness with which your decrees are executed, in the wastefulness of the administration, in the lack of consistent policy, and in the party passions that compete for influence over the government.
It has therefore resolved to explain the state of affairs to you, and to submit the measures it thinks best fitted to establish the Revolution, to confound federalism, to support and to secure abundance for the people, to strengthen the armies and to cleanse the
State of the conspiracies that are the plague of its life. 40

The Convention, in agreement with the Committee of Public Safety, or perhaps cowed by it, agreed to the continuation of provisional revolutionary government until peace was achieved at home and abroad. Robespierre, along with
Saint-Just, Danton and Marat, had long believed that terror was the only instrument capable of saving the Revolution. The Revolution was embattled and it needed a war government – strong, directive and fearsome. None of these Jacobin leaders had pretended otherwise since the fall of the monarchy. If the Girondins had triumphed in their place, they would have
needed the same weapon to restore order. ‘This Committee [of Public Safety] is precisely what we want,’ Danton had said back in April, ‘a hand to grasp the weapon of the Revolutionary Tribunal.’ Three months later, after the arrest of the Girondins and the suspension of the new constitution, the path to exercising terror lay clear, demanding and austere
before the exhausted Jacobins.

The Revolution was an extraordinary palimpsest. With each passing year its significant dates were overwritten by still more remarkable words and events. On the eve of the fourth anniversary of the Bastille’s fall, when celebrations were
set to be more muted than in previous years – given the wars and the food shortages – an unknown woman of twenty-five came from Caen to Paris and inscribed her own indelible mark. Caen had become the centre of Girondin resistance in the provinces. Some Girondin leaders like Pétion, and Louvet, who (on 29 October 1792) had risen like a spectre
to accuse Robespierre in the Convention, had escaped arrest in the capital and reunited in Caen, from where they published a Girondin newspaper in direct defiance of the Committee of Public Safety. It was a call to rebellion; it vilified the Jacobins, and still singled out Marat as the least defensible, most odious and culpable of them all. Charlotte Corday
read this paper in her home town and undertook a mission all her own. She travelled to Paris by coach, bought a long knife in the Palais Royal, and called on Marat that evening in the rue des Cordeliers. He was almost always at home. He left this record of his own daily regime:

I only give two hours out of the twenty-four
to sleep, and one to meals, dressing and household affairs. Besides the hours that I consecrate to my duties as a deputy of the people, I always devote six to listening to the complaints of a crowd of unfortunate and oppressed people who regard me as their defender,
forwarding their claims by means of petitions or memoranda, to reading and answering a multitude of letters, to supervising the printing of an important work that I have in the press, to making notes on all the interesting events of the Revolution, and
putting my observations on paper, receiving denunciations, and checking their veracity, and lastly to editing my paper. This is how I spend my day. I don’t think I can be accused of laziness. I haven’t taken a quarter of an hour’s recreation for
No wonder he was ill, seeking a measure of relief from his debilitating skin disease in a medicinal bath when Charlotte Corday came to the door. He was writing in the bath; his days were so crammed, he had to. She gave him the names of the Girondins at Caen. He
thanked her and noted them down. He was making a list when she plunged the knife straight into his heart. It was not so hard to kill him: small, frail, sick, naked, defenceless figure that he was.

Robespierre, characteristically, was jealous. For months he had spoken of plots against his own life, and volunteered flamboyantly for martyrdom,
while taking care to keep close to his bodyguards.\textsuperscript{43}

Now Marat was dead he hastened to remind his colleagues at the Jacobin Club that ‘Daggers are also marked for me.’\textsuperscript{44} He disapproved of all the interest in Marat – his poverty, his paper, his revolutionary contribution – that sprang up in the wake of his murder: ‘Eh! Of what importance to
the Republic are the financial affairs of one of its founders?’ Similarly, he was against honouring Marat’s remains by interring them in the Panthéon. ‘Is it next to Mirabeau that he will be placed? [Next to] that man who merits his reputation for profound villainy? Are these the honours solicited for the Friend of the People?’ ‘Yes,’ interrupted a Jacobin
named Bentabole, ‘and he shall have them despite those who are jealous of him!’ Ignoring the insult, Robespierre continued. This was not the time to be distracted by funeral celebrations: there was a war going on – Marat’s honours should wait until it had been won. What should not wait was vengeance. Marat’s assassin must be guillotined,
along with all the other perpetrators of tyranny, all the infidel representatives of the people (the Girondins), who encouraged revolt and intended to kill the true patriots one by one. The blood of these monsters must be taken to avenge their victims, whose blood had been shed for liberty. But it was too soon to distract the Jacobins from memories of
Marat. Alive, he had been a maverick in their camp, more often than not a serious embarrassment. Dead he became a hero. The next evening they voted to create a subcommittee of men of letters dedicated to keeping his spirit alive. Robespierre, meanwhile, limited himself to suggesting the Jacobin Club acquire Marat’s printing presses for its own
purposes.\textsuperscript{47}

Marat’s funeral became a public festival, in spite of Robespierre’s advice. On the day itself he was still feeling sour and so contrived to deliver an oration in Marat’s honour that pointedly avoided even mentioning his name. The artist David orchestrated the proceedings, decreeing that ‘Marat’s burial place will have the simplicity that befits
an incorruptible republican dying in honourable poverty. It was from underground that he identified the people’s enemies and friends: let him rest underground in death.’

He was interred in the garden of the Cordeliers Club. Young girls in white dresses and boys carrying branches of cypress surrounded his bier, followed by members of the Convention, the clubs and the
Representatives of each of the forty-eight Paris sections filed past his grave and spoke movingly of him. His heart was suspended in an urn from the ceiling of the Cordeliers’ meeting chamber – a secular relic in that requisitioned convent. In 1794, after Robespierre’s own death, Marat finally made it to the Panthéon. His remains were
carried in as Mirabeau’s were removed, so the revolutionary and the royalist never had to lie side by side as Robespierre had feared.

Why was Robespierre so sour? Did he really begrudge the murdered Marat a day of pomp and ceremony? It is only fair to point out that Robespierre felt the same way when Mirabeau died, uneasy at the distraction from
the business of revolution that a large public funeral occasioned. Back in 1791 he had been quick to remind the Jacobins that the focus of their preoccupations must remain the public interest – a grand abstraction from which personal feelings of bereavement, or regard for specific individuals whoever they were, must not detract. In 1793 too Robespierre
wanted to get on with saving the Revolution. Now that it had occurred, Marat’s death might be turned to advantage in the fight against the Girondins, the rebellious departments and the counter-revolution. He may not have cared much one way or the other for Marat as a person – but he knew a political opportunity when he saw one. It is even possible that the
oration in which he failed to mention the dead man’s name was itself intended to educate by example: beside the abstract principles of the Revolution mere individuals – their names, stories and careers – no longer mattered. This reserve in Robespierre was not new. He had long prided himself, and others had never ceased to congratulate him, on being
able to set the public good over his own private advantage. Like Marat, he worked incredibly hard. He attended the Convention by day and the Jacobins by night, he too wrote speeches, letters and a weekly journal. There was precious little time for a private life, even if he had valued or wanted one. Nothing came between Robespierre and the
Revolution – if it had, the history of each would have been entirely different.

Charlotte Corday was guillotined four days after her crime, with a beatific smile on her face. The executioner held her severed head up to the crowd and, in a fit of pro-Marat enthusiasm, slapped her cheek. Allegedly she
blushed – both her slapped and unslapped cheeks reddened – and those who were watching gasped in amazement. Physiologists several years later were inspired by this story to speculate on whether human sensation ends instantly at decapitation. But at the time, political interests eclipsed scientific ones. From the execution of Charlotte
Corday the Girondins acquired a secular saint of their own – the Jacobins had Marat, but they had a pure and beautiful young woman whose modesty did not desert her even in death. The fight between the two factions entered its final throes. It had long been a mortal combat. Now it was simply a question of how much more damage would be done to the
Revolution – how much more bloodshed there would be in the provinces and at the frontier – before it was over. To try to assess the state of affairs, the Convention sent various deputies out on mission to the detachments of the army deployed on home soil. In August 1793 Lazare Carnot, a member of the Committee of Public Safety with special responsibility for
the army, decreed that ‘the republic is a great city in a state of siege: France must become one vast camp, and Paris its arsenal’. He set out the war effort in graphic terms:

Every Frenchman is commandeered for the needs of the armies. Young men will go to the front, married men
will forge arms and carry food, women will make tents and clothing, and work in hospitals, children will turn old linen into bandages, old men will be carried into the squares to rouse the courage of the combatants, and to teach hatred of kings, and republican unity.
Robespierre himself could not be parted from Paris, but his brother Augustin left for the south, heading for Nice via Lyon and Marseille, to report on the extent of the support for the Girondins, who were now calling openly for a federalist revolt against the capital. When Charlotte Robespierre heard that Augustin was about to leave as a representative-on-
mission together with Jean François Ricord (deputy to the Convention from Var), who was taking his wife, she demanded to be included in the party. Charlotte got her way and the four of them set off accompanied by only two soldiers. Lyon was in revolt, but when their coach pulled up outside the town hall, things seemed calm enough. The two women waited
outside while Augustin and Ricord went in. A crowd began gathering around the stationary coach and the women were drawn into conversation. ‘We know that the Parisians say we are counter-revolutionaries,’ someone said, ‘but they are mistaken – look at our cockades.’ Charlotte expressed suspicions, as her elder brother would have
done; after all, counter-revolutionaries, indeed the king himself, had worn the tricolour cockade back in 1789. As the women’s exchange with the tense and increasingly angry crowd deteriorated, the two men were involved in a fierce altercation with municipal officers inside the town hall. It was apparent that sympathy with the Girondins was
running very high in Lyon. Returning to the coach, Augustin and Ricord decided it was not safe to spend the night and they must press on to Nice. Since it was likely that news of their mission had gone before them – Charlotte’s conversation with the crowd was, in hindsight, very unwise – now they did not dare take the main road, but went cross-country via
the small town of Manosque.
When they reached the bank of the river Durance, the guards who had gone ahead to check that it was safe to cross came rushing back warning that there were armed Marseillais with cannons on the other side. There was no choice but to turn back to Manosque. Here, trying to be helpful, the mayor offered the party an
accompaniment of fifty local National Guards. Uncertain of the sympathies of these men, Augustin and Ricord politely refused. During their flight to Varennes the royal family had encountered the same problem: it was always difficult to know how battalions of National Guards would act, since they were just ordinary citizens in arms and not professional soldiers.
So the party set off again for Nice unaccompanied. En route they received a message from the well-disposed mayor that the Marseille insurgents were in pursuit. At this, they abandoned the coach and fled on horseback into the mountains bordering the department of Vaucluse. Twelve local patriots went with them as guides – they had no choice but to trust
them – and they journeyed all night through the difficult passes. By the following evening they had reached the old fortified village of Sault. Here they encountered a young doctor who had been elected to the new convention in exile that the Girondin leader Guadet was planning to convene as soon as possible at Bourges. This doctor took Augustin
and Ricord to the local Jacobin club, where they were enthusiastically received. Considerably cheered, the party then decided to return to Manosque, this time with a band of twenty or so patriots. Their two guards went ahead to prepare their arrival. To frighten the people who had been so unwelcoming before, the guards spread the rumour
that the two deputies – one of them the brother of the famous Robespierre – were about to arrive with an army of six thousand. The town of Manosque would be razed to the ground and its inhabitants all slaughtered in punishment for their treatment of the national representatives. Wisely, the party moved on again before the emptiness of the rumour could become
apparent. Half an hour later the men from Marseille arrived, searched everywhere for the Parisians, then fell upon their abandoned coach, dragging it off to their home town in triumph. Augustin and Ricord demanded the return of the coach and it was sent back, vandalised. Finally they got to Nice. Here, Charlotte recalled, ‘public spirit was no better’. But the
presence of a detachment of professional soldiers from the French army, as opposed to unreliable battalions of local National Guards, meant that the party was at least safe from counter-revolutionary attacks. Indeed, under the protection of the army’s General Dumerbion, they even felt safe enough to attend the theatre. The third time they went they were
pelted with rotten apples. Sympathy for the Revolution was dying in the provinces. Back in Paris, Robespierre himself described the situation in apocalyptic terms:

From the north to the Midi, from sunset to dawn, the land is strewn with corpses and the blood of patriots drenches the
whole of France; the Midi revolts and joins our enemies in the north to forge chains for us; Marseille, hitherto the rampart of liberty, is today its tomb. The same fate awaits us if we do not display energy and if Paris does not rise as one to crush the hydras that are
whistling in our ears. 54

The members of the Committee of Public Safety were re-elected by the Convention every month, and Danton was voted off on 10 July. One of the reasons was his optimism in the face of the federalist revolt. Rejecting Robespierre’s apocalyptic vision, refusing to condone Jacobin threats of violent
repression in Bordeaux and elsewhere, he acted as though effort and compromise might be enough to reunite the country. Danton, for all his ferocity in the streets, understood compromise. In June he had married the young woman his first wife had picked out for him and their two small children before she died. Noting this remarriage, only four months
after the extraordinary scene in the graveyard over Gabrielle’s coffin, his critics conjectured that Danton was still unbalanced, distracted from public affairs, swept up in the solace of a new sexual liaison, no longer really in control of what he – still less the Revolution – was doing. Unlike Robespierre, Danton valued his private life. In a conversation between the two
men, during which Robespierre was speaking, as he did so often, about the importance of virtue and its role in revolutionary politics, Danton quipped, ‘Virtue is what I do every night in bed with my wife.’ Robespierre, not amused, jotted this down in his notebook for future reference.

Perhaps Danton did not mean it as a joke. In the
circumstances in which he found himself, in the context of the life he had led since 1789 – all that bloodshed, all those shattered dreams, the revolutionary fight still so far from won – sex, love, intimacy may indeed have seemed to him the best there is for human beings to hope for. This was emphatically not Robespierre’s view. He may not have been as
interested in sex as Danton was – he almost certainly had less experience of it. But such comparisons are elusive, even between the living, and between the dead they become ridiculous. Of much more importance than their relative sexual prowess is the fact that Danton and Robespierre, who had been such close revolutionary allies, clashed so
spectacularly in their vision of the good life. When they were together in opposition to the Old Regime, the king, the Feuillants, the Girondins, their differences did not matter so much. Once the Jacobins came to power and had to decide what to do with it, they became enormously significant.
On 27 July, Robespierre was at last elected to the Committee of Public Safety. Now, though he had more power than ever before, he was only one of twelve trying to rule France. When Danton had established the Committee earlier that year, it had only nine members. Its personnel had changed over the intervening months, and three extra places had been
added round the oval table at which it met in the Tuileries. There were four more changes of personnel soon after Robespierre joined, but then no more additions until after he fell.  

Some of his fellow members were close friends: Saint-Just, Couthon, who had to be carried in his wheelchair into meetings up what was once known as the queen’s staircase, Billaud-
Varenne and Collot d’Herbois. The others were Barère, the honey-tongued lawyer, Carnot, Hérault de Séchelles, Lindet, Saint-André and two unrelated men both with the surname Prieur. ‘Stranger set of cloud-compellers the earth never saw,’ Thomas Carlyle remarked of the twelve. In addition to internal clashes of vision and temperament, the
Committee as a whole was thoroughly embattled: its power and legitimacy were disputed abroad and in the provinces. In Paris there were also clashes with the Commune, with some of the city’s forty-eight sections, with the clubs, the factions and the streets.

Robespierre began assiduously attending the Committee’s meetings, which
were usually held in the evening, in a green-papered room inside the former palace. Elsewhere in the building the intimidated Convention still went through the motions of assembling during the day, even though the republican constitution it had been called to design was indefinitely suspended, filed away on a dusty shelf awaiting happier times. As
the first anniversary of the monarchy’s end approached, hope, power and fear were focused on nocturnal debates behind closed doors. Paris celebrated the 10 August anniversary by smashing the royal tombs at Saint-Denis; the already meagre food rations for the surviving royal prisoners in the Temple were reduced further; Marie Antoinette was transferred to
the Conciergerie, pending trial; Danton’s policy of conciliation in the provinces was replaced by one of repression – Lyon, where Robespierre’s siblings had recently been made so unwelcome, was under siege a week after he entered the Committee of Public Safety.

On the eve of his ascension to power, Robespierre had drafted a
personal revolutionary catechism. It provides a window into his mind at this frenzied time:

What is our aim?
It is the use of the Constitution for the benefit of the people.

Who is likely to oppose us?
The rich and the
corrupt.

What methods will they employ?
Slander and hypocrisy.

What factors will encourage the use of such means?
The ignorance of the sans-culottes.
The people must therefore be instructed.

What are the obstacles to their enlightenment?

The paid journalists who mislead the people every day by shameless distortions.

What conclusion
follows?
That we ought to proscribe these writers as the most dangerous enemies of the country, and to circulate an abundance of good literature.

The people – what other obstacle is there to their instruction?
Its destitution.

When then will the people be educated? When they have enough bread to eat, when the rich and the government stop bribing treacherous pens and tongues to deceive them, and instead identify their own interests with
those of the people.

*When will this be?*
Never.

*What other obstacles are there to the achievement of freedom?*
The war at home and abroad.

*By what means can*
the foreign war be ended?
By placing republican generals at the head of our armies, and by punishing those who have betrayed us.

How can we end the civil war?
By punishing traitors and conspirators, especially those
deputies and administrators who are to blame; by sending patriot troops under patriot leaders to reduce the aristocrats of Lyon, Marseille, Toulon, the Vendée, the Jura, and all other districts where the banner of royalism and rebellion has been raised; and
by making a terrible example of all the criminals who have outraged liberty and spilt the blood of patriots. 58

In Lyon and elsewhere there were plenty of terrible examples: horrific mass executions by grapeshot fired from cannons and group drownings in the Vendée –
crimes against humanity that the revolutionaries would today be called to answer for under the European human rights legislation they themselves pioneered. Robespierre had argued consistently since 1789 that in a time of revolution the end justifies the means, and even his advocates have to acknowledge that he did not flinch from the bloodiest
implications of his position. In 1792 the Commune of Paris had attempted to encourage France’s second largest city to imitate the Parisian September massacres. A friend of Robespierre named Joseph Chalier had been sent to Lyon as an emissary. Well received at the municipal level, Chalier met with resistance from the department and the National
Guard. He asked for reinforcement from Paris and corresponded regularly with another close friend of Robespierre, Léopold Renaudin. When the counter-revolution finally triumphed in Lyon in May 1793, the members of Chalier’s circle were shattered to learn that he had been executed. Afterwards, Robespierre led the Committee of Public
Safety’s policy of repression against the rebellious city. The siege of Lyon lasted until 6 October, and afterwards the Committee decreed mass executions and the destruction of all buildings, except the houses of the poor. ‘Lyon is no more,’ said Robespierre. His friend and colleague Collot d’Herbois admired his turn of phrase. Even so, Robespierre’s stance
on Lyon was not the most extreme. When his fellow Committee members Couthon and Collot d’Herbois tried to convince him that there were sixty thousand individuals in Lyon who would never make good patriots unless they were forcibly resettled elsewhere in France, and even then ‘the generations born of them would never be entirely pure’, Robespierre resisted.
He continued to insist that ordinary people – including the poor of Lyon – were intrinsically good. But to those deemed counter-revolutionary, he showed no mercy.

* 

The harvest of 1793 was good – it had been a very hot summer – but many of the watermills remained dry and
by autumn the flour was still not ready to send to the bakers. Since June prices had risen dramatically. In Paris food was scarce, soap had tripled in price, and even Robespierre had difficulty obtaining the silk stockings he always wore (he never abandoned his knee-breeches for the humbler costume of the sans-culottes). At the end of July, the Convention fixed
the price of bread and other basic necessities and imposed the death penalty on anyone convicted of hoarding. To some extent the Convention’s measures were intended to address the demands of the new best-selling newspaper, Jacques-René Hébert’s foul-mouthed *Le Père Duchesne*, which had taken over as the voice of the Parisian poor from *L’Ami du Peuple* after
Marat’s murder. Hébert was a leading figure in the Commune, the Jacobin Club and the Cordeliers Club. Robespierre already had reservations about him, and was certainly not in favour of radical social levelling of the kind proposed by the enragés, who had been calling for price controls since the beginning of the year.

On 2 September, the first
anniversary of the horrific prison massacres, news reached Paris that counter-revolutionary rebels had surrendered the great naval base at Toulon to the British. The enemy had penetrated France. Hungry, angry Parisians, impatient with the food queues that had become their way of life, panicked. The enragés took to the streets and another
insurrection was underway. The city was completely out of control for several days. On 4 September Hébert and his allies in the Commune turned popular demands for better wages and more bread into a general strike and the following day marched on the Convention. The Jacobins were persuaded to join in, even though Robespierre was reluctant because he knew
that – as the current president of the Convention – he was going to have to placate the angry crowd when it burst into the debating chamber.

It was at this point, on 5 September, confronted once again by the mob, that the Convention declared terror ‘the order of the day’. Even though Danton had been voted off the Committee of Public Safety, he was still
powerful in the Convention. Here he faced down the *enragés* and carried a controversial decree to limit the city’s forty-eight sections to just two meetings per week. This ended their daily sessions (or permanence) and curbed what, since 1789, had been prominent sites for popular protest. Danton also called for a ‘Revolutionary Army’, the ordinary people in
arms to act, not against food-hoarders (as the *enragés* wanted), but against the foreign enemy. On the spot the Convention agreed funds of a hundred million *livres* (which it did not have) to provide a musket for every man in France. In this atmosphere of patriotic unity, the main instruments for enforcing the Terror on the home front were fortified: the
Revolutionary Tribunal was expanded and divided into four concurrent chambers, so that it could more rapidly process a greater number of cases. Henceforth all judges and jurors were to be appointed either by the Committee of Public Safety or the larger Committee of General Security. Finally, on 17 September, the Convention passed the
terrifying Law of Suspects: anyone could now be arrested and punished with death who ‘either by their conduct, their contacts, their words or their writings, showed themselves to be supporters of tyranny, of federalism, or to be enemies of liberty’.\footnote{60} Under the Law of Suspects everyone — not just foreigners, as had previously been the case — was obliged to carry a
certificate of *civisme*, which was both an identity card and a stamp of civic virtue in one. Anyone without one of these cards could be arrested, and many thousands were.

After the declaration on 5 September, the Terror remained France’s official regime for nine months. During this time approximately sixteen thousand people were
formally condemned to death, most of them in the provinces, and there were many more unofficial victims who died in custody or were lynched without trial. Nearly two thousand were executed in Lyon after the city fell to the revolutionaries. Over three and a half thousand were guillotined when the revolt in the Vendée was finally suppressed, after
terrible loss of life on the battlefield and the murder of an estimated ten thousand rebels and civilians in retreat. The policy of inhumane repression worked. As autumn turned to winter, the Republic’s armies were once again succeeding abroad, and the federalist revolt unleashed by the fall of the Girondin faction was effectively over. In December Augustin
Robespierre, still with the army in the south, sent news that the strategic port at Toulon had been recaptured at last. He was proud to tell his brother that he had gone into action with the troops and distinguished himself as a fighter.

Between October and the end of 1793, 177 people were
guillotined in Paris after appearing before the Revolutionary Tribunal, now under the strict control of the Committee of Public Safety and the Committee of General Security. The trial of Marie Antoinette came early in the Terror. When the royal family were first imprisoned in the Temple tower, Paris’s Insurrectionary Commune took responsibility for
guarding them. It was the Commune that sent Robespierre to check all was quiet there while the September massacres were taking place. During the summer of 1793, the Committee of Public Safety intervened. Louis XVI’s son, Louis Capet as the Republic knew him, eight years old and ill, was separated from his mother, aunt and sister on 9
July by the Committee’s decree. Marie Antoinette fought bodily against this, clinging to her child and the bedpost until someone threatened to call the guard and she understood it was hopeless. Then she summoned all her remaining strength and said, ‘My child, we are about to part. Bear in mind all I have said to you of your duties … Never forget
God who thus tries you, nor your mother who loves you. Be good, patient and kind and your father will look down from heaven and bless you.’

Her son was dragged from the room, one of his manhandlers declaring, ‘Don’t be uneasy – the nation, always great and generous, will take care of his education’ before the door slammed shut. In the garden where the prisoners were
allowed to take exercise a new fence was erected to prevent Louis Capet from seeing his family. Marie Antoinette found a chink in it and surreptitiously glimpsed her son again three weeks after their separation. He was dressed as a miniature sans-culotte with the red cap of liberty on his head, and accompanied by a rough, abrasive tutor, a man named
Anthony Simon who was Marat’s next-door neighbour. The murder of his friend and patron on 13 July, just days after he took on the role of tutor, did nothing to improve Simon’s treatment of his charge. Marie Antoinette was horrified. On 2 August she was taken to the Conciergerie, ready to appear before the Revolutionary Tribunal. On the same day
the Commune sent her son a toy guillotine.

The Queen’s trial began on 14 October and lasted two days. During it, Hébert tried to prove that she had sexually abused her son. ‘Nature refuses to answer such a charge,’ Marie Antoinette retorted, ‘but I appeal against it to the heart of every mother who hears me.’ Robespierre was highly irritated. ‘That
fool Hébert will make her an object of pity!’ he complained. The prisoner did not want pity. She said, ‘I was a queen and you dethroned me – I was a wife, and you murdered my husband – I was a mother, and you have torn my children from me – I have nothing left but my blood – make haste to take it.’ She was guillotined before noon.
on 16 October. Robespierre seems to have taken little interest in this gesture of bloody vengeance. When Louis XVI went past his door on the way to execution, Robespierre turned his back in awed silence. When Marie Antoinette went past, not in a closed carriage like her husband with a priest and prayer book, but in an open tumbril exposed to the
braying crowd, he scarcely noticed. His mind was already on the trial of the Girondin leaders, much more politically significant for him and the Revolution than the death of one distraught, grief-stricken woman who had lost everything except her Roman Catholic faith.

The trial of the Girondins opened on 24 October, eight days after the queen’s
execution. Robespierre had already succeeded in opposing a vote in the Convention by *appel nominal*, which would have resembled the protracted vote over the king’s fate with every deputy stepping up to the tribune to deliver an opinion and verdict, some of them simply pronouncing the word ‘death’, others speaking interminably long into the
night for exile, imprisonment or acquittal. Even so, he did not have complete control of the Revolutionary Tribunal, which hesitated to condemn twenty-one Girondins brought before it, among them Brissot, so long the focus of Robespierre’s hatred. ‘I never liked Brissot as a politician,’ one contemporary remembered, ‘no one was ever more intoxicated by
passion: but that does not prevent me from doing justice to his virtues, to his private character, to his disinterestedness, to his social qualities as a husband, a father and a friend, and as the intrepid advocate of the wretched Negroes.' Why did Robespierre hate him so much? Both were idealists – supporters of the people and the oppressed everywhere.
But they had disagreed bitterly over whether France should go to war in 1792, disagreed again over the fate of the king, and disagreed with yet more vehemence about whether or not the new republic should have a federal structure to counter the disproportionate influence of Paris. Unlike the Incorruptible, Brissot had political skeletons in his
closet. He had had shadowy dealings with the police under the Old Regime, he had travelled to Britain and the United States, involved himself in schemes to resolve the debts that brought France to the precipice of revolution. Robespierre had tried to have Brissot arrested in the course of the September massacres, so he might be disposed of without due process. The plan
failed. Just over a year later, Robespierre was more desperate than ever to ensure the death of his long-standing enemy. Brissot would have felt the same if their situations had been reversed.

Brissot had been one of those fortunate enough to escape arrest on 2 June; Pétion was another. Brissot headed first for Chartres, only a short distance from Paris,
where he had grown up in his father’s inn. Then with a loyal friend, a false passport, minimal luggage and a brace of pistols, he travelled south through Nevers, then on to Moulins, where he was caught and taken back to the capital. He was imprisoned in the Abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Près like Mme Roland, to whom he had once written movingly of his romantic
responses to books during childhood. Reading Anson’s *Voyage*, for example, he had seen himself ‘constructing log-huts in the happy isles of Juan Fernandez and Tinian’. He had always been a dreamer. From prison he wrote long letters to the Convention, comparing himself to Cicero, asking to be heard, for a chance to explain himself. It was no
use. Brissot and twenty other Girondins were moved to the Conciergerie to await trial before the Revolutionary Tribunal. Those who still eluded arrest were declared outlaws and hunted down. Pétion’s body was found in a field half-eaten by wolves. To complete matters, Robespierre arranged to have the house of his former friend demolished.
The trial did not go well, from Robespierre’s point of view. He had been reluctant to let it go ahead, probably because he knew there was still a great deal of public support for the Girondins, who were eloquent and sounded convincingly patriotic. After five days, during which the possibility of acquittal – politically disastrous for the Jacobins –
gathered strength, steps were taken to ensure conviction. In the Convention a Jacobin named Osselin proposed a decree to end the trial. Robespierre stepped up to the tribune and said the proposal was too vague. In its place, he offered another to ‘reconcile the interests of the accused men with the safety of the country’: ‘I propose the decree that after three days’
hearing the President of the tribunal shall ask the jury whether they have enough evidence to satisfy their conscience: if they say no, the trial is to proceed until they are in a position to reach a verdict.’ But if they said yes, it was all over. Trial by conscience was something Robespierre had suggested before: it meant the jury’s decisions could be intuitive
rather than reasonable, and the accused could be convicted not only for their actions, but also for their dispositions and attitudes. In that frightening room above the Conciergerie dungeons, where there was one chair for the ringleader and benches behind for those destined to share his or her fate, what was on trial was a frame of mind. Individuals were beside
the point; what mattered was the triumph of the revolutionary mentality over anything that might oppose, challenge or detract from it. ‘Whoever trembles is guilty,’ Robespierre said darkly.

Guilty was the verdict on the twenty-one Girondins. When it was pronounced, one witness heard Camille Desmoulins exclaim in shock, ‘My God! My God! It is I
who kills them.’ He was referring to the part his newspaper had played in turning public opinion in Paris against the Girondins; Camille was sorry for it now, but it was too late. Another eyewitness recalled that Brissot ‘had scarcely heard the fatal word “death” when his arms fell to his side, and his head dropped suddenly upon his breast’. He wrote to
his wife, ‘Goodbye, my darling; dry your tears; mine are wetting the paper as I write. We shall be parted, but not eternally.’ Like Robespierre he still believed in an afterlife. Like Robespierre, too, he had lived for ideas – progress, human rights, grand abstractions that seemed almost within reach in the middle of the Revolution. On their way to
execution the Girondins sang the rousing Marseillaise. They sang it over the body of one of their party, Valazé, who had secreted a knife into the courtroom and stabbed himself as soon as he heard the verdict. There was talk of decapitating his corpse, but in the end it was only dragged along in the tumbril to the foot of the guillotine where the lives of the others ended.
One contemporary remarked, ‘In the Girondins Robespierre only killed a party; in Brissot he guillotined an idea.’ The idea in question might have been a federal French republic on the American model that had so impressed Brissot during his transatlantic travels before 1789, or a new and original model of republican government that differed in...
crucial respects from Robespierre’s. It is true that Robespierre thoroughly disapproved of some of Brissot’s ideas, even while sharing others. But it is also indisputable that when Brissot died, Robespierre was at last rid of a thoroughly despised personal enemy. In this instance, guillotining the man meant as much to him as guillotining the ideas which
menaced a republic ‘one and indivisible’.

Mme Roland followed her Girondin friends to the guillotine in early November. Gesturing towards the statue of liberty that had recently been erected on the plinth of the demolished statue of Louis XIV in the renamed Place de la Révolution, she said, ‘Liberty, what crimes are committed in your
name!’ Her husband was in hiding in the countryside. When he heard of her death he walked straight out of the house and committed suicide in a ditch.

On 24 October, the same day that the trial of the Girondins began, the Convention heard the ex-actor and dramatist Fabre d’Églantine read his
report on the new calendar it had requested for the new France: ‘We could not go on reckoning the years during which we were oppressed by kings as part of our lifetime. Every page of the old [Gregorian] calendar was soiled by the prejudices and falsehoods of the throne and the Church.’

There is evidence that Robespierre opposed this confusing and
anti-Christian innovation, since he wrote in his private notebook, ‘indefinite adjournment of the decree on the calendar’, but he did not get his way. 74 Fabre was the spokesman for the special commission that the Convention had set up to design the new calendar. He remembered seeing during his childhood what Robespierre certainly saw year in, year out
in Arras: the priests going out into the fields in May to bless the growing crops. For the benefit of his audience, Fabre put incriminating words into their mouths: ‘It is we, the priests, who have made this countryside green again; we who water these fields with so fair a hope … Believe in us, respect us, obey us, and make us rich: otherwise hail and thunder, which are at our
command, will punish you for your lack of faith, docility, and obedience.’ Now the people had arisen, the priests had fallen, and it was time for a revolutionary calendar. The new calendar was backdated to 22 September 1792, so that the day after the monarchy had been formally abolished became the first day of Year I of the Republic: a foundational event to rival
birth of Christ. On the new calendar, France now found herself already well into Year II of liberty:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>(Vendémiaire)</th>
<th>30 days beginning</th>
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<td>(Brumaire)</td>
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<td>22 October</td>
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<tr>
<td>Month of frost</td>
<td>(Frimaire)</td>
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<td>21 November</td>
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<td>Month of snow</td>
<td>(Nivôse)</td>
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<td>21 December</td>
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<tr>
<td>Month of rain</td>
<td>(Pluviôse)</td>
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<td>19 February</td>
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<tr>
<td>Month of fruit</td>
<td>(Fructidor)</td>
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When Robespierre was a
schoolboy he used to undress in the evenings to a reading about the life of the saint whose feast fell on the following day. Now Fabre explained that in addition to renaming the months, the days of the new ten-day week (three to a month) would be named after the objects and animals used by agricultural labourers. Every tenth day would be a day of rest.
bearing the name of an implement that would be useful to labourers returning to work in the morning: plough-day, roller-day, spade-day, sickle-day, water-pot-day and so on. Other days were to be named after animals, vegetables, flowers or other natural phenomena, and the five (six in a leap year) extra days left over from standardising the
number of days in a month were to be special ‘Sansculottides’, or without-breeches days, in honour of the nickname given to the working men of Paris without whom the Revolution would have ended long ago.

Whilst Fabre was deploying his poetic gifts in designing the new calendar, Robespierre was contemplating the wider
problem of education. Back in July, soon after the enactment – and suspension – of the new republican constitution, he had presented a bill on education to the Convention, in which the formation of children’s moral character was given as much attention as the instruction of their minds. It proposed centralised compulsory state education of all girls aged 5
to 11 and all boys aged 5 to 12. Afterwards there was to be free secondary education for those who wanted it. The cost was to be met through progressive taxation. The bill was heavily criticised for being too interventionist and expensive. Robespierre remained determined:

For a long time we have been waiting for
this: the opportunity to help a numerous and integral sector of society. The revolutions of the previous three years have done everything for the other classes of citizens, yet almost nothing for the most needy, for the proletarian citizens whose sole property is
their labour ... If you adopt the children of citizens without property, indigence will no longer exist for them. Adopt their children and you help them in the most precious part of their being. Those young trees will be transplanted into the national nursery,
where the same soil will nurture them and a vigorous culture fashion them: pressed one against another, vivified by the rays of a benign star, they will grow, develop, shoot all together under the regard and gentle influence of the fatherland. 76
Robespierre’s ideas on education were far in advance of his time and reflected his sense of the difference education had made to his own life, and his commitment to raising the standard of living for the poorest sector of society. But the Convention, unwilling to infringe parental opportunities to exploit child labour, or to incur the cost of
the nationwide programme of education he outlined, approved only a modified system of primary education. Undeterred, Robespierre persevered with his theories of moral development and the strategic role it might play in regenerating the republic. In this he was helped and inspired by his friend Saint-Just, who was beginning to argue that the Revolution
must reach far beyond politics, into the heart of civil society, and make war on all forms of moral perversity. 77

Robespierre had made an implicit pact with street violence in order to destroy his Girondin enemies in the Convention. It had been the mob breaking into the Convention and surrounding
it in June that had forced the expulsion of the Girondin deputies. But now they were gone he needed to restrain the violence that had helped him to power – he needed, in short, to govern. The Convention had begun the process of reasserting control over Paris on 5 September, when, at Danton’s suggestion, it limited the number of section meetings to two per
week. However, it had given in to the demands for price regulation of basic commodities, which culminated in the General Maximum Law on 29 September. In a rare gesture of self-indulgence, Robespierre added his own items to the list of essential comestibles: coffee and sugar. Conceding that these were artificial, as opposed to
natural, needs – human beings can survive well enough without them – he argued that these two products of colonialism were nevertheless addictive and the people would be deprived without them. Fabre d’Églantine backed him up, pointing out that sugar also had medicinal uses; and in the end Robespierre got his personal necessities on to the
general list of price controls. His silk stockings were more of a problem. Robespierre’s friend Claude Gravier, a distiller whom he had promoted to the jury of the Revolutionary Tribunal, received a letter around this time from the postmaster-general of Lyon, explaining that he was having great difficulty procuring hosiery for the Incorruptible but was
sending some ham and sausage instead.\textsuperscript{78}

Once again the Jacobin Club was torn apart by factional strife. Danton was still a member, but increasingly critical of the regime of Terror. He had lost control of the Cordeliers Club, distanced himself from extreme sans-culottes and openly opposed the enragés and followers of Hébert,
whose newspaper was still voicing violent popular demands. At the end of September Danton took his children and new wife to his country house in Arcis-sur-Aube, seemingly retiring from politics. Hébert, meanwhile, was prominent in the Commune, supported by the Cordeliers Club, and still attending Jacobin meetings. Robespierre was caught up in
the strife between Jacobin followers of Danton and Jacobin followers of Hébert. He struggled to keep the club together, but his own attendance declined, perhaps through ill health, or because of his engrossing responsibilities on the Committee of Public Safety. When he did speak at the Jacobins, he addressed the subject of atheism, insisting
that this was one of the most fearsome hidden enemies menacing the Revolution.

Robespierre had long opposed atheism and anti-clericalism. On the day that the National Assembly moved from Versailles to Paris in 1789, he had noticed with interest, and perhaps optimism, tricolour cockades on the cassocks of clergymen lining the route. Later, back
in Arras on holiday in 1791, he was dismayed to realise that every parish priest was a potential agent of the counter-revolution. When a large number of recalcitrant priests were murdered during the September massacres of 1792, he showed no regret. But a year later he had had enough: ‘Whoever tries to stop the saying of Mass is a worse fanatic than the priest
who says it,’ he told the surprised Jacobins on 21 November (1 Frimaire). Robespierre thought atheism in a public man or legislator nothing short of insanity. He quoted Voltaire: ‘If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him.’

It will be said, perhaps, that I am a narrow-minded man, a
prejudiced person, a fanatic. As I have already said, I do not speak as a private individual, or as a systematic philosopher, but as a representative of the people. Atheism is aristocratic. The conception of a great Being who watches over oppressed
innocence, and punishes successful crime, is democratic through and through ... I have been a poor sort of Catholic ever since my College days; but I have never cooled in my friendship for, or failed in my championship of, my fellow men. Indeed, I
have only grown more wedded to the moral and political ideas that I have expressed … The French people pins its faith, not on its priests, nor on any superstition, or any ceremony, but on worship as such – that is to say, upon the conception of an incomprehensible
power, which is at once a source of confidence to the virtuous and of terror to the criminal. 79

Robespierre reminded the Jacobins that he had raised his voice against atheism once before at their tribune. ‘There is nothing superstitious in using the name of the Deity. I believe,
myself, in those eternal principles on which human weakness repose, before it starts on the path of virtue,’ he had said in spring 1792. He regretted nothing. Now he returned to the topic from a position of much greater power.

Robespierre’s outburst was precipitated by the proselytising atheism of Hébert’s faction, especially
that of the procurator of the Paris Commune, Pierre Gaspard Chaumette. A few weeks earlier, the Archbishop of Paris, an old man named Jean-Baptiste-Joseph Gobel, had been persuaded to proceed to the Convention with an entourage of pro-revolutionary clergymen, and renounce his belief in God at the bar. To loud applause he laid his staff and Episcopal
ring before the Convention and declared that he recognised no form of national worship, except that of liberty and equality. Soon afterwards Chaumette obtained a decree that closed all the churches of Paris and placed priests under stricter surveillance. These measures were widely imitated throughout France. Meanwhile Hébert set about
organising a new kind of devotional ceremony. He was close to a printer named Antoine François Momoro, whose wife agreed to dress up provocatively as the Goddess of Reason. On 20 Brumaire (10 November), seated high on the altar of what had once been the Cathedral of Notre-Dame but was now the Temple of Reason, she received her worshippers with
an intimate kiss. When he heard, Robespierre was disgusted. He considered the recent vogue for flamboyant de-Christianisation gratuitously offensive and was convinced it would both exacerbate the civil war and alienate neutral foreign powers. Astutely, he pointed out that atheism must not become a religion in itself and argued passionately for
liberty of worship. He agreed that it was important to keep priests under surveillance and to appropriate Church wealth for the nation, but he wanted anti-Christian violence stigmatised, not encouraged by tasteless atheistic ceremonies. ‘Five years of Revolution directed against the priests has left them powerless,’ he assured the Jacobins. The real danger
was no longer religious fanaticism, but political intrigue. The Girondin faction had been destroyed, but another had already replaced it. Robespierre turned on Hébert and his friends to unmask them: ‘They want our jobs ... Fine, let them have them,’ he declared for rhetorical effect. Cries of ‘No! No! Stay where you are!’ echoed around him as he
proceeded to question their dedication:

I should like to see them, [pointing at Hébert and his supporters] day and night probing the wounds of the state, studying the needs of the people, and devoting their whole life to the national
welfare ... It is not merely patriotism, or enthusiasm, or an ingrained love of freedom that sustains our efforts; it is reason, which will make the Republic immortal; where reason reigns, the people is sovereign; and such an empire is indestructible.\textsuperscript{82}
One of the problems, one of the sources of his tremendous irritation with Hébert, was that Robespierre was planning to design some novel religious ceremonies for the new Republic. Hébert had stolen his thunder with a louche and ridiculous spectacle. Robespierre himself was hoping to achieve more pious and constructive effects: the
worship of the Supreme Being – a vague but benign otherworldly presence – that would raise the level of human conduct and moral aspiration, not lower it to the level of an orgy. In his private life, Robespierre could certainly be priggish. But his views on religion are not an example of priggishness. He thought Hébert’s approach irresponsible because it
squandered a valuable opportunity to institute a new system of theistic morality that would benefit the poor. Atheism, he argued, is the preserve of an elite: ‘when the conception of God comes to be attacked, the attack will not proceed from the popular instinct, but from the rich and the privileged’, he warned. 83

The day that Robespierre lectured the Jacobins on God,
1 Frimaire (21 November), was also the day that Danton returned to Paris. No one knows exactly why: perhaps after five years at the centre of the Revolution he simply could not stay away, or maybe friends in Paris persuaded him to return. As soon as he entered the Jacobin Club, Hébert tried to have him expelled. When the Girondins had tried to do the
same to Robespierre in 1792, Danton had leapt to his defence. Now Robespierre returned the favour. He did so in measured terms, so it was possible to hear notes of criticism within the overarching message of support. He made a point of mentioning that Danton had misjudged the treacherous General Dumouriez (so, at the time, had Robespierre
himself, but this he omitted to mention). Danton had also been less than enthusiastic in pursuing Brissot and the other Girondins, his friend reminded the Jacobins, but he was definitely not a traitor. Without this carefully modulated defence, Danton might have been excluded from the Jacobins. But instead, when Robespierre concluded his speech, the
president of the club embraced Danton and welcomed him back amid loud applause. After this slightly stilted scene of reconciliation, Danton, Robespierre and their old friend Camille Desmoulins joined forces against Hébert’s faction. The Girondins had not been dead two months, but the Jacobins had already found a new enemy to fight.
This time they were fighting against, not with, the Commune and the mob. Marat’s heart was swinging in its urn above the hall of the Cordeliers; it is difficult to guess which side he would have been on had he lived to see the Cordeliers turn on Danton.

On 14 Frimaire (4 December) the Convention passed a law designed to
further strengthen and centralise the revolutionary government. The new law made the Convention ‘the sole centre of the impulse of government’, and it brought public power throughout the country – departments, districts and local communes at the lowest level – under the direct control of the Committee of Public Safety; locally elected administrators
now became ‘national agents’ and the militant surveillance committees that had sprung up nationwide to defend republican principles and enforce the Law of Suspects found themselves integrated into a newly hierarchical system of authority. The representatives-on-mission were systematically recalled and replaced with administrators rigorously
vetted by the government. From this point no one, anywhere, was allowed to raise a private army, impose taxation, or deviate from national policy – the days when representatives-on-mission could act unchecked in the provinces were over. Meanwhile, popular assemblies in Paris’s forty-eight sections were suddenly answerable to the Convention
over and above the municipal commune. In effect, the Law of 14 Frimaire was an iron-fisted clamp-down on all activism that was not directly sanctioned by the Committee of Public Safety.

Despite the draconian Law of Frimaire, Camille Desmoulins set off on a new course of activism. He started a newspaper called *Le Vieux Cordelier* (The Old
Cordelier) in memory of the Cordeliers Club as it had been
before Hébert and his ultra-
revolutionists took it over. The paper was dedicated to
both Robespierre and Danton,
‘two friends of the editors’. Robespierre read the proofs
of the first issue, which
appeared on 15 Frimaire (5
December). Camille’s paper
was a call for clemency. Under the Law of Suspects,
the prisons of Paris were crammed full of ordinary men and women. It was time, Camille announced in his paper, to open the prisons. Recent news from the front line was good, the Republic had repelled its foreign enemies, the Terror had served its purpose – let it end. Clemency got a rapturous response. The crowd grabbed copies of Le Vieux Cordelier
as they came off the press. Camille, who had roused his audience in the Palais Royal gardens and defined for them the meaning of the revolutionary cockade in 1789, was working his magic again – this time to end the violence he had once incited so passionately. He had never been a cautious person. Feeling himself protected by both Robespierre and Danton,
who strongly supported the move towards clemency, and emboldened by the public’s enthusiastic response to his paper, Camille went further: in issue three he dared to call the Revolutionary Tribunal into question, and to hope complete liberty of the press might soon be restored. This time Robespierre had not seen the proofs. Issue four, fifteen days, one and a half
revolutionary weeks, later, was a direct appeal to him:

Oh! My dear Robespierre! It is you whom I address here ... Oh, my old school friend, whose eloquent discourses posterity will read! Remind yourself of the lessons of history and philosophy: love
is stronger, more lasting than fear; admiration and religion are born of generosity; acts of clemency are the ladder of pride by which members of the Committee of Public Safety can elevate themselves to the sky (the Roman Tertullian tells us this); they will
never reach it through paths of blood. 85

Not content with asking Robespierre to redirect the policy of the Committee of Public Safety – a dangerous and perhaps impossible undertaking – Camille went on to suggest that his friend had already publicly indicated willingness to do this. It would be wrong of him,
Camille recklessly implied, to renege on such good intentions.

It is true that on 30 Frimaire (20 December) Robespierre had raised the possibility of forming a Committee of Justice to examine some of the more contentious arrests under the Law of Suspects. Camille seized on this and called for something more dramatic: a
Committee of Clemency. Let the prisons open and the Terror resolve itself in love and reconciliation. He knew he would be accused of being reactionary (or excessively moderate), so he evoked Marat, arguing unconvincingly that at this point in the Revolution, his own extreme clemency was the equivalent of Marat’s extreme violence. 86
Robespierre had already warned him obliquely to stop being ‘so versatile’. Robespierre’s friend the printer Léopold Nicolas had warned him too: ‘Camille, you seem very close to the guillotine.’ But Camille quipped back, ‘Nicolas, you seem very close to a fortune. It is only a year since you dined on baked apples, but here you are printer to the
State.’ He was a man of great boyish charm – seemingly still at school, wisecracking in the playground and showing off his knowledge of classical literature. His wife Lucile adored him: ‘Let him save the country in his own way,’ she said, covering the mouth of a friend who was counselling caution.  

In the Jacobin Club on 18 Nivôse (7 January),
Robespierre finally lost his temper with Camille. The Jacobins, as expected, were critical of Camille’s moderation – it had nothing at all in common with Marat’s revolutionary extremism so far as they could see. Cheekily, Camille offered to burn issue three of *Le Vieux Cordelier* as long as his forthcoming number five was read. Robespierre apologised
for him, telling the club to regard him as an unthinking child who had fallen into bad company, ‘There is no need to expel Camille. We will burn his pamphlet.’ Camille, so fond of, and so good at, repartee, could not resist: ‘Burning is not an answer,’ he retorted. This, famously, was Rousseau’s response when the Parlement of Paris burnt his novel *Émile.*
Camille knew exactly what Rousseau and his works meant to Robespierre. He had quoted Rousseau against his friend once before, when they had a public tiff in 1791. It was infinitely more dangerous to do so again now. Any trace of amusement left the Incorruptible’s lips; any glimmer of indulgence in his weak green eyes disappeared. He might not
have been Camille’s equal at repartee, but he was so much better at anger: ‘What! You still try to justify your aristocratic works! Understand this, Camille, that were you not Camille, there would be no indulgence for you. You have bad intentions. Your citation: Burning is not an answer! Is it applicable here?’

Even Camille could see
he had gone too far. He started to panic. Falling back on their long-standing connection, he said to Robespierre: ‘You criticise me here, but was I not in your home? Did I not give you my proofs to read, and solicit your help and advice in the name of friendship?’ This could only make things worse by putting Robespierre on the defensive in front of the
Jacobins. ‘You did not show me all your proofs; I only saw the first two. Not wishing to be involved in a quarrel of any kind, I preferred not to read the rest. If I had read them, I would have been accused of dictating them.’ Danton intervened to try and limit the damage. He urged Camille to accept Robespierre’s chastisement, it was well meant. Danton may
or may not have believed in Robespierre’s good intentions, but he wanted to close the damaging row. It was obvious that Robespierre genuinely cared for Camille; it was equally obvious that the Incorruptible might well pride himself on sacrificing a personal friend to the Revolution. Until now, Robespierre had only sacrificed his enemies.
Perhaps Danton had some inkling that this was about to change.

The following evening Fabre d’Églantine was at the club when the discussion of Camille’s *Le Vieux Cordelier* resumed. Despite the success of his revolutionary calendar, Fabre was feeling very nervous because his involvement in a financial scandal concerning the
colonial East India Company had recently become public. As Desmoulins again came under attack, Fabre got up to leave. Robespierre noticed and turned on him as well: ‘As for this fellow, who never appears without a lorgnette in his hand, and is so clever at expounding theatrical plots, let him explain himself here, and we will see how he comes out of it.’ That
lorgnette really irritated Robespierre. Fabre had an ostentatious habit of sitting in the Jacobins or the Convention and surveying the proceedings as though he was at the theatre. Perhaps he just wanted to remind everyone that he had once been an actor denied civil status under the Old Regime. Robespierre—egocentrically—had another explanation. He
suspected that Fabre was parodying his own habit of fixing the audience through eyeglasses that he moved up and down on his forehead while speaking at the tribune. If this was what Fabre was doing, he must have been as foolish as he was foppish, since the time when it was safe to poke fun at Robespierre was gone. Stopped in his tracks skulking
out of the club, Fabre heard cries of ‘Guillotine him!’ and fled as the Jacobins voted to strike his name off their register.

On 23 Nivôse (12 January) the Committee of Public Safety ordered Fabre’s arrest on charges of corruption and forgery in connection with the East India Company. The original French East India Company
(Compagnie des Indes) went bankrupt in 1769 under the Old Regime. But it was relaunched under royal patronage in 1785 and enjoyed a lucrative trade monopoly. Early in the Revolution this monopoly was cancelled in the name of liberty, but the Company continued to thrive regardless. It even managed to evade the Legislative
Assembly’s attempt to impose stringent taxation on transferable stock after the fall of the monarchy in 1792. In fact the Girondin ministers had connived in this evasion, believing as they did that prosperous foreign trade was essential to the modern republic they envisaged for France. However, with the proscription of the Girondin deputies in June 1793, the
Company had lost its protection, and the Convention charged it with profiteering, sealed its warehouses and forced it into liquidation. Fabre was vocal in these debates and suggested that the Company’s attempts to evade taxation had been inspired by foreign enemies – Prime Minister Pitt in particular. Meanwhile a group of speculators bought
up falling shares in the Company, anticipating that certain interested members of the Convention would force through a decree that would cause the share price to rise before the Company finally went into liquidation. Fabre managed to get himself tangled up in this scam. And through Fabre, Danton was possibly implicated.

Fabre was thrown out of
the Jacobins on 19 Nivôse (8 January), and two days later Camille was struck off too. Robespierre, having convinced his fellow Jacobins to opt for censure, now supported Camille’s expulsion:

You can see in Camille’s writings revolutionary principles side by side
with the maxims of a thoroughly pernicious reaction (or moderation). In one passage he raises the courage of patriots, in another he feeds the hopes of aristocrats … He is a fantastic mixture of truth and falsehood, of statesmanship and absurdity, of sensible
ideas and of selfish chimerical designs. In my view, Camille and Hébert are equally wrong ... I assure all faithful members of the Mountain [Robespierre’s Jacobin supporters] that victory lies within our grasp. There are only a few serpents left for us to crush
[applause and cries of ‘we will crush them’]. Let us not trouble about this or that individual, but only about the country. 

There is no reason to think he spoke in bad faith. He thought the Terror was still needed to control the threat of counter-revolution.  Against the violence of Hébert and the
Commune, Camille and Danton had launched a cry for clemency. Robespierre thought treading the middle ground between these two extremes more prudent. He was irritable, tired and unwell – Camille and Fabre (for different reasons) had annoyed him – but he was capable of setting such personal feelings aside to concentrate on what he
believed best for the Revolution. ‘Let us not trouble about this or that individual, but only about the country’ is a formula as admirable as it is chilling. Robespierrre had no intention of defending Camille simply because he was an old school friend, which does not mean he felt easy at the looming sacrifice of his former friends. Soon after the public
row with Camille, he collapsed, was ill intermittently for the rest of the month, and then between 22 Pluviôse (10 February) and 22 Ventôse (12 March) scarcely left the Duplay household. In this state of nervous strain he called Saint-Just back to Paris to help him. Saint-Just had gone on mission to the army, but Robespierre’s need took
precedence.

Saint-Just, who loved the countryside, much preferred being sent out on mission to being cooped up in Paris pacing the short distance back and forth between the Jacobin Club and the Convention. He went in the month Nivôse to the Army of the Rhine, accompanied by his friend
and fellow Jacobin Philippe Lebas, who had recently married Élisabeth Duplay. This small travelling party, like the one that had accompanied Augustin Robespierre earlier in the year, managed to combine business and pleasure. Saint-Just was a charming companion, reading aloud passages from Molière and Rabelais, singing Italian arias
to pass the time, and fastidiously attentive to the needs of his friend’s new and pregnant wife when she was coach-sick. Arriving in Strasbourg, he set about punishing counter-revolutionary conspirators and taxing the rich to relieve the sufferings of the poor. The soldiers did not like him; they found him too severe, unwilling, as he was, to
recognise any form of punishment short of death. Saint-Just’s second mission took him to Lille and its environs. Here he was even more severe, initiating draconian measures against all former nobles still living in the area. He was still away on 17 Pluviôse (5 February) when Robespierre, shortly before collapsing completely, delivered to the Convention
one of the most important speeches of his life: Rapport sur les principes de morale politique qui doivent guider la Convention nationale dans l’administration intérieure de la République (A Report on the Principles of Political Morality which should guide the Convention in the Interior Administration of the Republic).

In this speech Robespierre
developed the personal revolutionary creed that he had privately professed on the eve of his election to the Committee of Public Safety. He asks, ‘What is our aim?’ and answers: ‘the peaceful enjoyment of liberty and equality, and the reign of that eternal justice whose laws are engraved, not on marble or stone, but in the hearts of every man – of the slave who
forgets them, and the tyrant who denies their truth’. Then he goes further, outlining the kind of morality that will obtain in his ideal republic:

In our country, we want to substitute morality for egoism, honesty for love of honour, principles for conventions, duties for decorum, the
empire of reason for the tyranny of fashion, the fear of vice for the dread of unimportance: we want to substitute pride for insolence, magnanimity for vanity, the love of glory for the love of gold: we want to replace good company by good character,
intrigue by merit, wit
by genius, brilliance
by truth, dull
debauchery by the
charm of happiness.
For the pettiness of
the so-called great we
would substitute the
full stature of
humanity; in place of
an easy-going, frivolous
and discontented people,
we would create one that is happy, powerful and stout-hearted, and replace the vices and follies of the monarchy by the virtues and astounding achievements of the Republic.  

There it was, Robespierre’s vision of France, a prim society of
patriotic, uncorrupted, serious equals. In his republic there would be only innocent pleasures, no frivolous distractions, no debauchery. No one would value money above honour, and honour itself would be defined as personal integrity, just as Rousseau said it should be long before 1789. The problem was that even after five tense and traumatic
revolutionary years, Robespierre’s dream was still a very long way off. For this reason, he explained, the Terror must continue:

If the basis of popular government in peacetime is virtue, its basis in a time of revolution is both virtue and terror – virtue, without which
terror is disastrous, and terror, without which virtue has no power ... Terror is merely justice, prompt, severe, and inflexible. It is therefore an emanation of virtue, and results from the application of democracy to the most pressing needs of the
In the hands of despots, Robespierre argued, terror was a weapon of oppression. But terror wielded by virtue was the refuge of the poor. Back in 1792 he had advised the Jacobins not to sponsor the development of a new kind of musket that could fire twenty rounds a minute: what might happen if aristocrats
got hold of it and turned it on the people? Now he made the opposite case, arguing that the weapons of tyranny must be appropriated by the people and used in their name. Specifically, the people, so long oppressed, must seize the weapon of terror and turn it against the Republic’s external and internal enemies. Robespierre had always been preoccupied by internal
enemies: even before he left Arras in 1789 he had given one of his pamphlets the title *Les ennemis de la patrie démasqués* (Enemies of the Country Unmasked). Since the Revolution began, however, these internal enemies had multiplied dramatically. Disguised and insinuating, they were not always easy to recognise, but Robespierre had been quick
to spot the most prominent: General Lafayette, Mirabeau, Brissot, General Dumouriez. Now he identified the two opposing factions – Hébert’s proponents of extreme violence, and Danton and Camille’s advocates of extreme indulgence – as the new internal enemies of the French people. Demanding a vote of confidence in the Convention for the
Committee of Public Safety, doing its best to save the Revolution, he issued a double warning to its critics: those who thought the Committee too harsh, and those who thought it not nearly harsh enough.

Robespierre’s speech was interrupted throughout by loud applause. Afterwards it was printed and widely distributed by the Convention
and the Jacobins. Three days later he retired from public view. A rumour went round that he had been poisoned. When he reappeared in March (Ventôse) he said: ‘Would to God that my physical strength were the equal of my moral fortitude! I might then, this very day, confound the traitors and call down national vengeance on every guilty head.’ If his
illness was genuine, if the Revolution had strained him to breaking point, his instinct was still to turn his suffering to political advantage. He was frailer than many of the other revolutionaries – a much less powerful speaker than Danton, slower than Camille Desmoulins, more circuitous than Saint-Just – but none of them had sharper political instincts. While Robespierre
was ill, or possibly pretending to be ill, Saint-Just rushed back to Paris. He reiterated the message of his friend’s widely praised speech, but, unlike the Incorruptible, he was alarmingly succinct: ‘The republic is built on the ruins of everything anti-republican. There are three sins against the republic: one is to be sorry for State prisoners; another is to be opposed to
the rule of virtue; and the third is to be opposed to the Terror."

By these criteria, the friends of Hébert and the friends of Danton were all republican sinners. As usual, Saint-Just thought there was only one appropriate punishment: death.

Robespierre had asked for a vote of confidence in the Committee of Public Safety to pursue the new enemies on
his list. But the Committee’s members were far from agreed on how to save the Revolution. Collot d’Herbois, for example, thought Paris could be placated by an alliance between the Jacobins and the Cordeliers (now led by Hébert), if the Jacobins could be persuaded to abandon Robespierre’s censorious attitude to extreme violence at this point. Collot
was even taking up the cause of the disgraced terrorist and ex-representative-on-mission Jean Baptiste Carrier. Carrier had been in charge of the repression in Lyon and Nantes. Among other atrocities, he had instituted a new version of republican marriage, which involved tying a naked man and woman together and drowning them. When he
heard of this, Robespierre, appalled, insisted on recalling Carrier to the capital.

On 14 Ventôse (4 March) Carrier proposed, and Hébert seconded, a motion at the Cordeliers Club to declare a state of insurrection. The motion was carried and the club hung black crêpe over its copy of the Declaration of Rights. Plans were afoot to surround the Convention and
demand the expulsion of Robespierre and his allies, a repetition of the insurrection that had brought down the Girondins on 2 June 1793. But Hébert’s insurrection never materialised: only two of the city’s forty-eight sections were prepared to rise. Nor did the Commune rise. There are many possible explanations. Hébert was not Danton – it is not a simple
task to rouse and direct a violent crowd, even in a time of revolution. Danton had a special gift for it – something to do with his astoundingly deep, strong voice and the breadth of his physical frame. Moreover, many of the poor in Paris thought Robespierre and his allies could and would help them, which diminished the appeal of Hébert’s promises to
intervene even more radically in the economy. Others were too jaded after five tumultuous years to take to the streets again. And some were too frightened of falling foul of the police in these brutal times – the centralising Law of Frimaire had done its work, and there were considerably more obstacles to insurrection now than there had been earlier in the
Revolution.

Robespierre returned to work on 22 Ventôse (12 March), along with Couthon, who had also been ill. The next day the Jacobins gave them a rapturous welcome. Robespierre, seizing the moment, immediately denounced Hébert and his faction, who were arrested later that evening on the general charge of conspiracy.
Twenty of them were tried before the Revolutionary Tribunal seven days later and, by application of the three-day rule, which Hébert himself had supported when it was introduced to secure the conviction of the Girondins, all but one were found guilty and sent to the guillotine. In the short interval between the arrest and trial of the Hébertistes, a
delegation arrived at the bar of the Convention, including someone who sang a song of congratulations to the deputies and their Committee of Public Safety. Danton objected – he proposed that no one should be allowed to sing songs in the Convention, such behaviour was disrespectful and inappropriate. No one knew it at the time, but this
uncharacteristically uncharacteristically prim intervention was destined to be Danton’s last. There were already some signals suggesting that, after the Hébertistes, his own faction might be next to fall. But Danton still believed that the Committee and Tribunal he had brought into being – not to mention the Convention that owed its existence to his part in the fall of the
monarchy – would never dare strike at him.

Whatever his role in bringing about the downfall of the Hébertistes – his illness and absence from public life makes it impossible to tell precisely – Robespierre benefited enormously from their demise. Besides the Cordeliers Club, the War
Ministry was the main source of Hébert’s support, and it had distributed his *Le Père Duchesne* to the troops, greatly boosting the newspaper’s circulation and influence. Robespierre’s colleague on the Committee of Public Safety, Carnot, had for months been working to erode the power of the War Ministry, but soon after the executions of the Hébertistes,
all six of the ministries inherited from the failed constitutional monarchy were radically restructured, purged and downgraded to commissions. On 12 Germinal (1 April) the Convention, following the Committee’s recommendation, agreed to the formation of twelve new executive commissions, which Robespierre succeeded
in staffing with personnel loyal to himself. There were only two exceptions: the Army Movement Commission, and the Finance Commission. The rest were effectively under Robespierre’s control. Once again he displayed his sharp political instincts, expanding his sphere of control through patronage. In this respect he far surpassed his colleagues.
on the Committee of Public Safety. Where they tended to operate as isolated individuals, carving up the Committee’s great power among themselves, specialising and working alone, Robespierre – perhaps by instinct, perhaps as a result of his experience in the Jacobin Club – relied on a loyal entourage. To an outsider it looked like a
faction. To him it was simply a network of like-minded people he could trust.

Another consequence of the downfall of the Hébertistes concerned the Commune. Hébert had been powerful within it, and after his execution his superior, the atheist Chaumette who had closed the Parisian churches, was arrested. At this point Robespierre moved to
remodel the Commune, specifically by doing away with the municipal elections through which its delegates were chosen by the Paris sections. In the autumn of 1792, after the collapse of the constitutional monarchy, Robespierre had exerted a powerful influence in the Commune, and despite its recent domination by the Hébertistes he still had
friends there. Some were representatives from his own Paris Section des Piques (Section of Pikes), one was a former priest, Jacques-Claude Bernard, whom the Commune had deputed to escort the king to the guillotine; others included a clock-maker, a bookseller and a manufacturer of coloured prints. Chaumette was replaced by a very close
associate of Robespierre, Claude Payan, originally an artillery officer from Valence, who set about developing Robespierrist support inside the Commune. Payan and his brother had come to Robespierre’s attention during the federalist revolt, when they played a prominent role in rallying the Jacobins of the Midi in support of the Convention
and the Committee of Public Safety. Payan, like Saint-Just, was almost ten years younger than Robespierre. An ardent believer in the power of propaganda, he began a paper, the *Antifédéraliste*, which became the Committee of Public Safety’s official publication. An ardent moralist, as well, he hoped Robespierre would ‘centralise public opinion and make it
uniform’. There were also changes to the National Guard that indirectly benefited Robespierre after the fall of the Hébertistes. The sans-culottes’ Revolutionary Army (one of the instruments of the Terror which Danton had first suggested in 1793) was disbanded on 7 Germinal (27 March) following the execution of its commander.
in chief as an Hébertiste. Its all-important artillery units, however, were kept intact and added to those already under the control of François Hanriot, head of the National Guard and Robespierre’s close friend. Hanriot had previously displayed his loyalty to the Jacobin faction in the Convention when he used his troops to surround the Tuileries and arrest the
Girondin deputies back in June. Now with the artillery units under his command Hanriot had even more power at his disposal; he effectively controlled the armed forces of Paris.

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On the evening of 2 Germinal (22 March), Robespierre retraced his steps to the Marais Quarter, where he had
lived for his first two years in Paris. He went to a dinner at which Danton was also a guest. Robespierre seemed silent and agitated. Bold as ever, Danton asked him directly why there were still so many victims of the Terror: ‘Royalists and conspirators I can understand, but what about those who are innocent?’ ‘And who says anyone innocent has
perished?’ Robespierre retorted coldly.99 Danton asked him if they could put aside their private differences and think instead of the future of France. He should have known that the Incorruptible already thought of nothing else. If the reports of what passed between them are accurate, Danton tried to talk to Robespierre man to man – tried, as he often did in both
his personal and political life, to compromise. But Robespierre never favoured compromise. His principles were paramount; everything, even his conscience, had to be tailored to fit them. To him, the idea that he and Danton were similar kinds of men, who might mutually agree to set their differences aside, was anathema. ‘At this moment, I am you,’
Robespierre had written when Danton’s wife died. A little over a year later, there was no trace of identification left. ‘I suppose that a man of your moral principles would not think that anyone deserved punishment,’ he said sarcastically to Danton. ‘And I suppose that you would be annoyed if none did,’ came the cutting reply. Robespierre got up and left. Danton’s eyes
Later that evening, Robespierre allowed the Committee to add Danton’s name to the list of the proscribed. Before, he had violently opposed it – now he agreed. His signature on the warrant for the arrest of Danton and his followers was tiny: eleven tight letters and half a neat line underlining them – emphatic, or perhaps
just resigned. Robespierre could lose his temper. He had lost it with Camille and now he had lost it with Danton. But he was not the kind to send people to the guillotine because he had lost his temper. He had reached the firm conclusion that his vision of the Republic and the conditions for its survival had parted company with Danton’s. Soon afterwards,
Camille went round to the Duplay household, but came back to the flat he and Lucile still lived in, upstairs from Danton, saying: ‘I am done for: I have been to call on Robespierre, and he has refused to see me.’ There were still people loyal to Danton in the Convention and throughout the city. One of them came to tell him the warrant had been signed and
he must flee to avoid arrest. Allegedly he refused, saying, ‘One does not take one’s country with one on the soles of one’s boots,’ a poignant remark from someone who had his own understanding of patriotism.¹⁰² Danton’s patriotism was every bit as passionate as Robespierre’s – but fatally different in other respects. He still kept saying over and over, ‘They will not
Danton was wrong. He was arrested in the middle of the night after a joint meeting of the Committee of Public Safety and the larger, but less powerful, Committee of General Security. Camille Desmoulins, Fabre and other close associates of Danton were also arrested. They were placed in solitary confinement in the
Luxembourg gaol, very close to the Cordeliers Club and the building in which Danton and Camille had lived since 1789. As Danton arrived, another inmate, Thomas Paine, famous author of *The Rights of Man*, came up to greet him. Paine had made a distinguished contribution to both British politics and the American Revolution. He had come to Paris hoping for
similar success, but after befriending the Girondins his hopes ended in imprisonment. Danton’s English was better than Paine’s French. He said, ‘Mr Paine, you have had the happiness of pleading in your country a cause which I shall no longer plead in mine.’

In the Convention the next morning, Saint-Just read a report against the Dantonists. He stood stiffly at
the tribune, his text held motionless in one untrembling hand, while he used the other to emphasise his main points with a cutting gesture that reminded his audience of the guillotine: ‘If you save Danton you save a personality – someone you have known and admired; you pay respect to individual talent, but you ruin the attempt in which you have so
nearly succeeded. For the sake of a man you will sacrifice all the new liberty that you are giving to the whole world.'

He ended devastatingly with: ‘The words we have spoken will never be forgotten on earth.’

The Convention sat in stunned silence. Saint-Just’s speech drew on a series of hurried notes that Robespierre had jotted down for him:
notes which still survive, and which show beyond any shadow of doubt the depth of the Incorruptible’s complicity in the attack on his former friends. In the wake of recent financial scandals, the evidence against Fabre was so strong that it hardly needed special corroboration. Nevertheless, Robespierre blamed Fabre for inspiring Camille Desmoulins to
publish *Le Vieux Cordelier*, implicitly repudiated his own involvement with the paper, and suggested it had been part of a counter-revolutionary plot approved by Danton. Moving on to Camille, Robespierre noted his vanity and vibrant imagination, which equipped him well for being Fabre’s and Danton’s henchman. He hesitated to add more – and this in itself
suggests that Robespierre’s notes were sincere, however distorted and fantastical; he believed what he was writing.

On Danton, he wrote much more. Danton had once been close to General Lafayette and to Mirabeau; he had associated with Barnave and the Lameth brothers (who sided with the Feuillant reactionaries when the Jacobins split after the king’s
flight to Varennes); he had tried to save Brissot and the other Girondins; he had been friends with the treacherous General Dumouriez. All these liaisons looked much more suspicious in retrospect than they had at the time. But this was not the kind of distinction Robespierre’s fevered mind now made. The notes continued: Danton had set himself to imitate Fabre’s
theatrical mannerisms and had made himself ridiculous by crying at the tribune and privately in Robespierre’s presence. It is true that at the end of their last meeting Danton’s eyes filled with tears: how haunted by those tears Robespierre must have been to explain them away in such an extraordinary manner. Moreover, Robespierre went on,
Danton’s reputation for patriotism was unwarranted. He had played no part in the rising that ended the monarchy on 10 August 1792; he had left Paris for Arcis before it, and on the night itself had to be dragged from his bed to attend the meeting of his section. In fact, Danton had been in the street that night and had sanctioned murder on the
steps of the Hôtel de Ville; afterwards he had been to the front line and seen blood flowing. Now Robespierre, who had never personally participated in revolutionary violence, reproached him with physical cowardice. He also accused him of being fat, lecherous and indolent. There was bile and a touch of madness in this document – even Saint-Just could see that
only bits of it could be incorporated into the official report.

After Saint-Just’s speech, one of the deputies broke the silence in the Convention by proposing that Danton should be heard at the bar. Robespierre moved at once to prevent this, arguing that it would be tantamount to granting Danton a privilege because of who he was. The
Revolution, Robespierre insisted, was not about men, it was about principles. Danton must be tried by the Revolutionary Tribunal as an ordinary prisoner and not given a special opportunity to defend himself before the Convention: ‘No! We want no privileges! No! We want no idols!’

I must add here that a
particular duty is imposed on me to defend the purity of principles against the designs of intrigue. For they have tried to frighten me as well: they wanted me to think that if Danton were in danger, the menace would reach me too. They represented him to me
as a man to whom I ought to adhere – as a shield that could defend me, a rampart without which I would be exposed to the darts of my enemies. I have been written to – Danton’s friends have sent me letters, they have persecuted me with their speeches. They thought the
memory of an old friendship, former faith in feigned virtues, would induce me to slacken my zeal and my passion for liberty. Well, I declare that not one of these motives has made an impression on me. I declare that, were it true that Danton’s dangers were to
become my own, that if they were to cause the aristocracy to take another step towards seizing me, I would not look upon that circumstance as a public calamity. What are dangers to me? My life belongs to my country, my heart is free from fears, and if I died it would be
without reproach and ignominy.  

Long and rapturous applause followed Robespierre’s intervention. His speech was masterful, preaching the rigid application of impersonal principles, but in the distinctively self-referential rhetorical style that he had refined to perfection over the
last five years. No one else spoke so insistently, so predictably or so protractedly about himself in the Revolution. Yet no one else could have been relied upon to put their personal feelings aside with Robespierre’s relentless commitment to what he believed was the common good. No friendship, no bribe, no pleasure, no pain could deflect him from
pursuing what he saw as the people’s cause. It is true that Danton’s friends had written to him. Lucile Desmoulins’ mother had even asked him to remember the joy he had felt holding his godson Horace on his knee. Surely Robespierre would intervene to save Danton and Camille so they could return to their families? But it was on his ability to scrupulously set
aside such feelings that the Incorruptible prided himself. He could speak about himself so often because he identified so completely with the Revolution – the two were not separate in his mind. Even more peculiarly, he was surrounded by others who also believed in this coincidence of Robespierre and the Revolution. It helped that his incorruptibility was
genuine, not a fraudulent façade. Had he been implicated in a financial scandal (like Danton or Fabre), taken a bribe, indulged a streak of personal perversity (as Carrier had in Nantes), or even just been spotted, like Mirabeau, with a couple of prostitutes in the Palais Royal gardens, Robespierre’s career would have disintegrated. The
strange combination of his self-centred rhetoric, clean living, clear principles and passionate political commitment made him seem like the Revolution incarnate.

The morning of 13 Germinal (2 April) was warm for the time of year, so all the windows were open as the Revolutionary Tribunal
assembled at 10 a.m. to hear the Dantonists accused. They were charged with conspiring to overthrow the government (the Committee of Public Safety and Committee of General Security, both still nominally responsible to the Convention). But these charges were far-fetched and conflated with accusations of corruption arising from the East India Company scandal.
The public crowded into the vast room, its beautiful gilt ceiling and marble floor resonant of the Old Regime. Soon there was no more space, but still the people came, lining the grand staircase, pressing up around the walls of the Palais du Justice on its small island at the heart of Paris. The crowd filled the streets and quays outside and stretched back
across the bridge Pont Neuf to the left and right banks of the Seine. When he spoke, Danton’s deep, booming voice rang out through the open windows like the tocsin. It is said the crowd could hear him clearly across the river. He was asked for his name and address: ‘My abode will soon be nothingness. As for my name, you will find it in the Pantheon of history.’
When Camille was asked his age, he replied: ‘Thirty-three, same age as that sansculotte Jesus Christ.’\[109\] It was obvious that the Dantonists were going to be defiant to the end. To try and mitigate their effect on the jury, judges and crowd, Danton and his five associates (including Camille and Fabre) were put on trial with a selection of ten other prisoners allegedly
implicated in the East India Company scam. During the trial a couple more prisoners were added to further confuse matters.

Everyone remembered that the Tribunal had acquitted Marat – the outcome here was not a foregone conclusion – and this may have been one of the reasons Robespierre was initially reluctant to agree to Danton’s arrest when it was
first proposed in the Committee of Public Safety. On the second day the first witness, a man named Pierre Joseph Cambon, was called. Danton looked him in the eye and said, ‘Cambon, do you really believe we are conspirators?’ Cambon could not suppress a smile. ‘Look, he’s laughing! Write it down that he laughed!’ shouted Danton, laughing himself.
Then he began the defence that reverberated louder than the president’s bell:

You say that I have been paid, but I tell you, a man like me cannot be bought. Against your accusation – for which you cannot provide proof, not even the hint of a proof or the
shadow of a witness –
I pitch my entire revolutionary career.
It was I who in the Jacobins kept Mirabeau.
from leaving Paris. I have served long enough,
and my life is a burden to me, but I will defend myself by telling you what I have done. It was I
who made the pikes rise suddenly on 20 June and prevented the King’s journey to St Cloud (in 1791). The day after the Massacre of the Champ de Mars a warrant was out for my arrest. Men were sent to kill me at Arcis, but my people came and defended
me. I had to flee to London, but I came back ... At the Jacobins, I demanded the Republic. It was I who knew that the court was eager for war. It was I who denounced the policy of the war.\footnote{111}

Here he was interrupted by the question: ‘But what did
you do against Brissot and his associates?’ For it was well known that whereas Robespierre had hated Brissot ever since they disagreed over the war, and had fought him to the guillotine, Danton had been less active in the fall of Brissot and his Girondin friends. ‘I told them that they were going to the scaffold,’ Danton retorted, ‘when I was a minister [for Justice] I said
it to Brissot in front of the whole cabinet.’ He resumed:

It was I who prepared 10 August. You say I went to Arcis. I admit it, and I am proud of it. I went there to pass three days, to say goodbye to my mother, and to arrange my affairs because I was shortly to be in
danger. I hardly slept that night. It was I who had Mandat killed [on the steps of the Hôtel de Ville] because he had given the order to fire on the people … You reproach me for being friends with Fabre d’Églantine. He is still my friend, I still think he is a good citizen as
he sits here with me ... With regard to those who were once my friends, I will tell you this: Marat had a volcanic character; Robespierre I have known as tenacious and firm; but I – I have served in my own way ... I would embrace my worst enemy for the sake of
the country, and I will give her my body if she needs the sacrifice. 112

Danton was turning the tide of the crowd – its currents responded to the pull of his powerful voice. It was exhausting work and he had to pause briefly to rest. But when he did so, the president of the Tribunal, a friend of
Robespierre’s named Martial Joseph Armand Herman, immediately called him to order and warned him to defend himself with proof, not rhetoric. More quietly Danton replied: ‘That a man should be violent is wrong I know, unless it is for the public good, and such violence has often been mine … If I have been excessive here, it is because I have
found myself accused with such intolerable injustice. [Then, raising his voice again] As for you Saint-Just, you will have to answer to posterity’. 113

Saint-Just was out of earshot. He was in the Convention preparing a motion even more stringent than the three-day rule that ended the trial of the Girondins. He proposed that
‘any prisoner who resists or insults national justice shall at once be debarred from pleading his case’. The intimidated deputies gave their consent. In addition to all their other anxieties, they were frightened by a rumoured revolt in the Luxembourg gaol where the Dantonists had been held after their arrest. Robespierre suggested that Saint-Just’s
report, and the new decree, should be taken to the Tribunal and read aloud to the audience there. On the last morning of the trial this was duly done, and the prisoners were prevented from finishing their defence. The trial was summarily closed. Danton roared, ‘We are going to be judged without being heard.’ Camille tore to pieces the text of the speech
he had intended to make; and to avoid further trouble the prisoners were hustled out of the court before they could hear the sentence – which was death.

Danton spent most of the last twenty-four hours of his life trying to calm Camille, who was crying like a distraught child and asking distractedly, ‘Will they kill my wife too?’ She was only
twenty-three. He wrote her a final long letter that ended:

Despite my torment, I believe that there is a God. My blood will efface my sins, my human weaknesses, and God will reward what is good in me — my virtues and my love of liberty. I will see you again one day,
oh Lucile! ... Adieu, Lucile, my life, my soul, my divinity on this earth ... I feel the shore of life retreating before me. I still see Lucile. I see you. My crossed arms grip you. My bound hands embrace you. My severed head rests upon you. I am going to die.¹¹⁶
Lucile never received this. She had already been arrested and accused of trying to incite the rumoured revolt in the Luxembourg gaol. A week later she did indeed follow her husband to the guillotine, as he had feared.

By the time the carts and an armed guard came for the Dantonists, late on the afternoon of 16 Germinal (5 April), Camille was more
composed. The condemned saw the beauty of Paris for the last time: the soft golden light reflected from the tall windows of the houses on the right bank of the Seine; the lilac and the cherry blossoms in the Tuileries gardens; the Café de l’École where Danton had sat before the Revolution, wooing his first wife and dreaming of life as a lawyer. Then they turned into
the rue Saint-Honoré, and there in the street was an artist, daring to draw the violence that was still in Danton’s face. Danton only lost control of himself, ranting and raving violently, when they came level with number 366, the Duplay household, shuttered tight against the crowd as it had been on the day Louis XVI went past on his way to
execution. Somewhere inside – silent, alone – was Robespierre.

One eyewitness saw the prisoners passing along the rue Saint-Honoré, and ran back afterwards through the Tuileries gardens to stand at the railings, from where it was possible to get a good view over the Place de la Révolution. There stood the guillotine, waiting for the
prisoners beside the statue of liberty. By now it was nearly 6 p.m. and the sunset had turned the plaster statue red. Danton was the last to die. His shadow was immense. He told the executioner to be sure to show his head to the crowd, and he muttered, ‘I shall never see her again … no weakness.’ He might have meant his new wife, or some other woman who, for
whatever reason, meant the world to him. More likely he meant France: the country he loved passionately and had long been prepared to die for. He had already begged pardon of man and God for his part in establishing the Revolutionary Tribunal that sent him to his death. And in the last few moments, another eyewitness, closer to the scene, saw him scan the
crowd before lying down beneath the guillotine. She saw someone in that crowd catch his gaze, then a hand raised quickly in the priestly gesture of sacramental absolution.
10

Robespierre’s Red Summer\textsuperscript{1}

ROBESPIERRE NOW FOUND
himself deeply preoccupied by punishment. Within hours of Danton’s death he was back at the Jacobins, insisting they speak of nothing else that evening except conspiracy. ‘Let us now frighten aristocrats in such a way that they are not only afraid to attack us, but do not even dare to try and deceive us,’ he suggested to the applauding audience.² He
may have been instrumental in the immediate promotion of his friend Martial Herman from president of the Revolutionary Tribunal to the Commission for Civil Administration and Police. Like Saint-Just, Claude Payan at the Commune and Robespierre himself, Herman was a stringent moralist. The son of the registrar of the old Estates of Artois, and a
fellow lawyer, he had almost certainly known Robespierre in Arras long before the Revolution. Herman was at the top of Robespierre’s list of patriots, ‘an enlightened and honest man capable of the highest employment’, the perfect person to put in charge of a commission which, among other far-reaching powers, oversaw the operation of the
Ten days (one revolutionary week) after Danton’s death, Robespierre supported Saint-Just’s recommendations to the Convention to revise and tighten police laws. Foreigners and ex-nobles were to be expelled from Paris and from all strategic towns on the Republic’s borders. All political trials
would henceforth be held in Paris, so the punishment of counter-revolutionary suspects could be standardised. This centralisation may have been an attempt to halt the atrocities of the Terror in the provinces, but it had severe implications for the capital. There were already nearly seven thousand people crammed into the Paris’s
prisons, and the new laws would greatly aggravate the crisis. Augustin set off again to the army (this time taking along a mistress instead of the uncongenial Charlotte). His letters to his brother were full of disturbing news from the provinces: food shortages; hunger; corruption; soldiers racked by venereal disease; anti-clerical vandalism; counter-revolutionary plots.
Meanwhile, in the Vendée, the civil war still festered: burning, pillage, massacre – scenes of apocalyptic horror that Robespierre himself never saw, but had no difficulty at all in imagining, late at night in the rue Saint-Honoré.

After supporting the fierce new police laws, Robespierre was absent from the Jacobins and the
Convention between 30 Germinal (19 April) and 18 Floréal (7 May). As always, it is possible he collapsed – the strain of condemning Danton taking its toll on his overworked mind and body. Yet rumour has it that he spent the day before his reappearance, his thirty-sixth birthday, celebrating out in the countryside with the Duplays and his dog Brount,
perhaps even visiting one of Rousseau’s renowned retreats at Montmorency. Robespierre, by this point, looked much older than his years. The contemporary pictures of him all show sunken, heavily lined cheeks around a grimly set mouth; his eyes were more variable – sometimes simply intense, at other times terrifyingly severe. According to another
rumour, on his return to the Convention he stood at the tribune with a new-found calm and control – for the first time there was none of the convulsive twitching or the neurotic fiddling with his glasses, or the other agitated mannerisms of someone who, despite everything, still found it a challenge to raise his voice in public.

Robespierre’s speech on
18 Floréal addressed the relationship between republican principles, religion and morality, consolidating the public professions of personal faith he had made in the past. There was, he had no doubt, a God and an afterlife for human souls. More than this, he attempted to show how the religion of patriotism that had been implicit in the Revolution
ever since the great Festival of Federation on the first anniversary of the fall of the Bastille might now be developed, institutionalised and used to secure the social foundations of the still very precarious Republic. Here it was, at last: Robespierre's presentation of his most profound personal beliefs, his ardent faith in a public religion that he thought could
save the Revolution, and the close – to some minds very suspiciously close – connection between the two. Officially he was representing the views of the Committee of Public Safety, but as so often, his approach was blazingly personal.

He began with appropriate grandeur: ‘The world has changed. It must change again.’

He listed
evidence of man’s progress and mastery of the physical world: the development of languages; the advances of agriculture; the discovery of electricity (he had not forgotten his triumph in the lightning conductor case back in Arras); the construction of terrestrial and celestial maps (he had not forgotten the Coronelli globes in the library at Louis-le-Grand either); the
discoveries of Newton; the artistic achievements of his friend the revolutionary artist David. Everything had changed in the physical order, and now everything must change in the moral and political order too. He compared man’s reason to the globe half in light and half in darkness; so far only the arts and sciences had been touched by enlightenment,
but Robespierre wanted to venture further into the shadowy realms of morality. This was by no means an eccentric desire. The abbé Sieyès (temporarily retired from politics), the Marquis de Condorcet (dead in prison) and a fair number of the other revolutionaries Robespierre had met, or known, shared it too. What made his vision distinctive was the peculiar
coincidence of three major obsessions: his interest in moral development; his belief in God; and his passionate commitment to democracy. Addressing the Convention, especially those deputies inclined towards atheism, he demanded to know:

Who commissioned you to announce to the people that God
does not exist? Oh you, who are so passionate about this arid doctrine, yet have no passion for your country! How does it help a man if you persuade him that blind force presides over his destiny, and strikes at random, now at the virtuous, now at the criminal?
Does it help him to believe that his soul is nothing but a thin vapour that is dissipated at the mouth of the tomb? Will the idea of annihilation inspire him with purer and higher sentiments than that of immortality? Will it give him more respect for himself?
and his fellow men, more devotion to his country, a braver face against tyranny, or a deeper disdain either for pleasure or for death? No ... the dying breath of those poor people who die beneath the blows of an assassin is an appeal to eternal justice! The innocent
on the scaffold make tyrants pale in their triumphal chariots: would they have such ascendancy if the tomb made the oppressor and the oppressed equals? … If the existence of God and the immortality of the soul were nothing but dreams, they would
still be the most beautiful conceptions of the human spirit.\textsuperscript{5}

No one could call Danton innocent – though he was not guilty of the crimes for which he was executed. No one knows if his last breath was an appeal to eternal justice – though this was certainly part of his rant outside Robespierre’s door on the
way to the guillotine. How, in all seriousness, could Robespierre square his passionate belief in God and eternal justice with his part in a regime of terror that was claiming more and more lives by the day? He did it by convincing himself that not a single innocent person had been condemned. ‘And who says anyone innocent has perished?’ he asked Danton
coldly at their last meeting. But it was increasingly difficult to maintain this contorted position. The strain became obvious when, in the middle of his speech proposing public worship of the Supreme Being, Robespierre suddenly lashed out at Danton’s ghost:

Danton, the most dangerous of all the
enemies of the country, if he had not been the most cowardly – Danton, temporising with every crime, connected to every plot, promising criminals his protection and patriots his loyalty, artful in giving his treasons the pretext of public
good, in justifying his vices by his pretended faults. He contrived through his friends to have the conspirators, who were on the point of bringing about the ruin of the Republic, accused in an insignificant or favourable manner, so that he might have an opportunity of
defending them ... and be the better able to rally all the enemies of liberty against the republican government. 

This defamation of a former friend, in the midst of a speech on patriotism and religion, may simply reflect Robespierre's habitual impulse to suborn anything.
and everything fresh in the public’s mind to his current political purpose. Or perhaps it was a more personal exorcism of his confused regret at Danton’s death. Either way, it was a clear warning, that the new progressive and democratic religion he envisaged was perfectly compatible with the continuation – perhaps even the intensification – of the
Terror.

At the same sitting the Convention approved the decree establishing worship of the Supreme Being. Article VII outlined the festivals to be celebrated by the Republic:

Article VII. It [the Republic] shall celebrate on successive décadis
[the republican Sabbath, occurring once every ten days]
the following festivals: The Supreme Being, and Nature; the human race; the French people; the benefactors of mankind; the martyrs of freedom; liberty and equality; the
Republic; the liberty of the world; patriotism; hatred of tyrants and traitors; truth; justice; modesty; glory and immortality; friendship; temperance; courage; good faith; heroism; impartiality; Stoicisim; love; conjugal fidelity; fatherly
These festival plans were a straight projection of Robespierre’s own sober system of values. He saw the
long-suffering ordinary people of France as modest, stoical and oppressed by misfortune. For them he wanted to inaugurate a democratic regime in which poverty would be honourable, not shameful, and glory more meaningful than fleeting sensual gratification. Ultimately, his model of family life was traditional: conjugal fidelity, fatherly
affection, mother-love and filial piety – all those things that were missing from his own disrupted childhood. The secure foundation for his values was, as it had always been, belief in God. Earlier that year he had been horrified to hear that the gates of cemeteries in Lyon and Nevers were being inscribed with the atheistic motto: ‘Death is an eternal sleep.’
Now, with deep gratification, he saw, as he walked through Paris, men on ladders painting in gold letters over the doors of abandoned Christian churches the first tenet of the new religion: ‘Article I. The French people recognises the existence of the Supreme Being, and the immortality of the soul.’

Three days after delivering his momentous
speech, Robespierre and Barère, his colleague on the Committee of Public Safety, were browsing in a bookshop near the Palais Royal. The talk that day was of Louis XVI’s sister, Mme Élisabeth, who was on her way to the guillotine after nearly two years’ imprisonment in the tower of the Temple. Out in the street people were blaming Robespierre for her
death, although he, in fact, argued against it on the Committee. Bitter, or just despondent, he turned to his colleague and said, ‘You see, it is always me.’\textsuperscript{7} He had done more than anyone to identify himself wholly with the Revolution, and now that the Revolution had become the Terror, he found himself identified with that too. The next day, 22 Floréal (11
May), he decided to go on an impromptu visit to the tower. No one knows why he went. When they heard about it, his enemies spread the rumour that he was contemplating marriage to the deceased king’s daughter, Mme Royale, and scheming to secure his tyranny over France by mixing his blood with that of the Capet dynasty. The princess left her
own report of the incident, which mentions no such ludicrous designs: ‘One day there came a man who I believe was Robespierre. The officers showed him great respect. His visit was a secret even to the people in the Tower, who did not know who he was; or, at least, would not tell me: he stared insolently at me, cast his eyes on my books, and, after
joining the municipal officers in a search, retired.'

Whatever he was doing, or looking for, it was typical of Robespierre to be momentarily distracted by the spines of some books. Another source claims that the princess managed to pass her distinguished visitor a note: ‘My brother is ill. I have written to the Convention for permission to go and take
care of him. The Convention has not answered me. I repeat my request.'

There is no record of Robespierre having visited the young heir to the abolished throne: Louis Capet as he was now known. The nine-year-old boy, living in squalid solitary confinement, severely beaten for saying his prayers at night, degraded and sick, might have touched the
Incorruptible’s heart. What would Robespierre have said if he had known that Capet had been allowed to raise three canaries in his dank and lonely prison cell? If he had heard that those tamed and treasured birds were suddenly taken away because the pastime that had brightened his own childhood was considered too aristocratic for poor Capet? But no one
bothered Robespierre with such details, or dared ask him what was on his mind when he walked away from that terrible place, its child prisoners and abusive guards.

The first Festival of the Supreme Being was scheduled for 20 Prairial (8 June). Amidst the frenzy of preparation – revolutionary
stage sets by David and music by Gossec, as usual – there were two attempts to assassinate Robespierre. Neither was very determined. In the first, on 3 Prairial (22 May), a man named Admiral hung about in the street all day, hoping to fire at Robespierre, but ended up aiming at another member of the Committee of Public Safety, Collot d’Herbois. The
gun misfired and the only person injured was a locksmith who ran to help Collot. The second attempt occurred on the following evening. At about 9 p.m., a sixteen-year-old girl named Cécile Renault knocked on the Duplays’ door and asked to see Robespierre. She acted very suspiciously, babbled something about the Old Regime, was soon arrested
and afterwards found to be in possession of a knife (a fruit knife – not the kind of blade that had killed Marat). When questioned she said she had only ‘wanted to see what a tyrant looked like’, rather as Danton had once skipped school at the time of Louis XVI’s coronation ‘to see how they made a King’. Renault’s testimony was as confused and confusing as Damiens’
had been after his attempt to assassinate Louis XV back in 1757. It was not even clear that she had intended to murder Robespierre, still less what her motives for doing so might have been. A rumour went round that he had staged the whole affair to boost his popularity with the people, who loved a near-martyr almost as much as they loved a real one.
Whatever the real story was, Robespierre, who had been speaking regularly for the last four years of his imminent assassination, reacted with all the panic of someone who had narrowly escaped death. When the Public Prosecutor, Fouquier-Tinville, called round to see him at the Duplays’ later in the evening, he found him offensively dictatorial.
Robespierre persuaded the Committee of Public Safety that the situation warranted recalling Saint-Just to Paris from his latest mission with the army. Such was his agitation that he managed to sign the document recalling his best friend twice. He also vetoed any special honours for the locksmith wounded trying to help Collot d’Herbois, and made a speech
in the Convention that was almost incoherent with paranoia: ‘Slander, arson, poison, atheism, corruption, starvation, and murder – they [the enemies of France] have been prodigal in every sort of crime: but there still remains assassination, assassination and again assassination.’

Even so, he could not disguise his pleasure at being (at last) ‘judged worthy of the
tyrants’ dagger’. Let no one say city life was less dangerous than the battlefield; ‘we have nothing to envy our brave brothers in arms’, he reassured himself and the other deputies, who had kept a safe distance from the front line.

Later that evening the Jacobins were rapturous in their relief that Robespierre had survived. He rose to the
occasion, announcing:

I feel myself more independent than ever of the wickedness of man. The crimes of tyrants and the weapons of their assassins have rendered me freer and more formidable to the enemies of the people, my spirit is
more disposed than ever to unmasking traitors and tearing off the masks with which they still dare to cover themselves … We swear by the daggers already reddened with the blood of the Revolution’s martyrs, and recently sharpened for us too, to exterminate every
single one of the criminals who want to rob us of happiness and liberty.11

Letters of congratulation flooded into the rue Saint-Honoré and Robespierre kept at least some of them: ‘Everlasting thanks to the Supreme Being, who has watched over your life!’ wrote one admirer from
Vesoul. Whether or not Robespierre staged either attempt on his life (or both), no one can doubt that he turned them instantly to political advantage. Yet this does not mean that his fear was faked. ‘We shall never get out of our present state. I am worried to death: I am losing my mind,’ he muttered in unguarded moments to his tobacconist, a pretty
The morning of 20 Prairial (8 June), Whit Sunday in the old Christian calendar, It was a morning bathed in brilliant summer sunshine, and the rest of the day was destined to be the happiest of Robespierre’s
life. The citizens of Paris had decorated their houses with wreaths of oak, laurel, fresh flowers, tricolour ribbons and flags. Joachim Vilate, a friend of Robespierre and a juror on the Revolutionary Tribunal who had been given lodgings in the part of the Tuileries palace known as the Pavilion de Flore, encountered him pacing round the premises at an early
hour, far too nervous to have breakfast, because the day of the first Festival of the Supreme Being had arrived. Vilate persuaded Robespierre to accompany him upstairs to try and eat something. Robespierre’s nerves stemmed from his election four days previously as president of the Convention, which meant he would officiate as a kind of high
priest at the inaugural ceremony of the new religion that meant so much to him.

From Vilate’s rooms there was a wonderful view of the Tuileries gardens. Robespierre, standing at the window, was awed by the crowd beginning to assemble below. He could see women with garlands of fresh-blown roses in their hair and branches of palm or laurel in
their hands; men with oak leaves in their hats, and children strewing the ground with violets and myrtle. Intoxicated with joy he said to Vilate: ‘Behold the most interesting part of humanity! Here is the universe assembled before us! Nature, how sublime, how delightful, thy power! How the tyrants must turn pale at the thought of this Festival!’\textsuperscript{14} On that
same morning, the guillotine, which had been in alarmingly frequent use within earshot of the Tuileries palace (over the previous seven days alone it had executed 119 people), was tactfully moved to the site of the demolished Bastille. Afterwards it was moved even further out of the city centre because the blood shed beneath it was beginning to pollute the city’s water
At midday, Robespierre, dressed in a sky-blue coat with an immense tricolour sash, went back down into the garden, where he joined the other deputies to the Convention, similarly attired, wearing swords and plumed hats and bearing posies made of flowers and sheaves of corn. Robespierre’s posy was slightly larger than everyone else’s.\textsuperscript{15}
else’s — it had been lovingly constructed in the Duplay household. According to Vilate, he absent-mindedly left it behind on an armchair on his way down to the Festival. The immense crowd listened to Robespierre give a rather vague theistic speech, beginning: ‘The day forever fortunate has arrived, which the French people have consecrated to the Supreme
Being.’¹⁶ Then they watched him set fire to a cardboard statue of Atheism – a hideous misshapen figure with cumbersome drapery and ass’s ears that the crowd had been puzzling over earlier in the day. From the flames another cardboard statue emerged – a representation of Wisdom, fair, majestic and only slightly singed. After one more speech
underscoring the meaning of this ceremony, they all sang a song to the Supreme Being, and processed to the Champ de Mars (recently renamed the Champ de la Réunion).

Throughout the ceremony, Robespierre could hear sarcastic and derisive comments coming from other Convention deputies behind his back, daring to snigger at the rituals in which he had
invested so much thought and hope. There was nothing he could do, short of turning round and interrupting the proceedings, but afterwards he complained about it bitterly. Almost the whole population of Paris, about half a million people, had turned out for the occasion. On the old Champ de Mars – where there had already been four celebrations of the fall of
the Bastille, with a fifth now imminent – the assembled congregation sang patriotic songs as the deputies filed up a papier-mâché mound (symbolic of the Jacobin Mountain) and took their seats beneath a tree of liberty at the summit. Cries of ‘Vive la République!’ echoed all around, and the day ended with athletic sports, inspired by the festivals of ancient
Greece. It must have seemed to Robespierre that the optimism of the early Revolution had been revived – a new religion, a new beginning – his tremendous personal and political struggle had not been in vain.

The next day he drew up laws to further fortify the Revolutionary Tribunal and invented a new official category of criminals:
enemies of the people, ‘those who, in any manner and no matter with what mask they have concealed themselves, have sought to thwart the progress of the Revolution and prevent the strengthening of the Republic’. Through his friend Couthon, who presented the proposals in the Convention, Robespierre recommended that the Tribunal should now accept
‘moral proofs’ against accused persons, who were no longer to be allowed advocates. Power to send people before the Tribunal was to be extended (from the Committee of Public Safety and the larger Committee of General Security) to the Convention, to individual representatives-on-mission in the provinces, and to the Public Prosecutor, Fouquier-
Tinville. Enemies of the people included anyone seeking to re-establish monarchy, discredit the Convention, betray the Republic, communicate with foreign enemies, interfere with food provision, shelter conspirators, speak ill of patriotism, corrupt officials, mislead the people, spread false news, insult morality, deprave the public
conscience, steal public property, abuse public office, or plot against the liberty, unity and security of the state. The punishment for all these crimes was death. The proposals were passed by the Convention without the usual prior discussion in the Committee of Public Safety, and became known as the infamous Law of 22 Prairial: the climax of the Terror. The
passing of this law made it possible to execute someone for declaring: ‘A fig for the nation’, for producing sour wine, for hoarding, writing, or attempting to communicate with the English. From 22 Prairial (10 June) until the arrest of Robespierre on 9 Thermidor (27 July), 1,376 people were guillotined in Paris. In those forty-seven days, the Revolutionary
Tribunal condemned more people to death than it had done in all the months since Danton established it in March 1793. Was the bloodletting Robespierre's fault?

He bears direct responsibility for the Law of 22 Prairial, which was designed to both speed up and expand the Revolutionary Tribunal's work. In this
simple, technical, legal sense, his hands are covered in blood. It does not matter which, or how many, individuals he intervened personally to save at the eleventh hour. He initiated the law that menaced absolutely everyone, on the most spurious grounds, and without recourse to any form of defence. He also played a prominent part in extending
the Revolution’s agenda to include the moral regeneration of the people – and he was prepared to resort to the most drastic measures to achieve this. It was not enough to encourage patriotism – anti-patriotic sentiment had to be exterminated. It was not enough to nurture moral rectitude – depravity had to be stamped out. In this way,
the joyous Festival of the Supreme Being and the dreadful Law of 22 Prairial were all too compatible. Together they aimed at realising the republic of virtue that Robespierre dreamed of. He may not have thought it likely to come about in his lifetime – he was ill, desperately anxious, anticipating assassination, in despair over the corruption
silting up around him – but for him none of these were reasons to stop trying. And so he went on: not as a man like Macbeth, so steeped in a river of blood that ‘returning were as tedious as go o’er’. Robespierre was no cynic – he was, as Danton told the Revolutionary Tribunal, ‘above all, a tenacious man’, and what he held on to most tightly of all was his dream of
virtue. He went on with the Terror, kept moving through that gory river, because he believed it necessary for saving the Revolution. He can be accused of insanity and inhumanity but certainly not of insincerity.

Following the Law of 22 Prairial, there was a savage quarrel in the Committee of Public Safety; they had to shut the windows to avoid a
public scandal. This was hardly the first big row to erupt round the oval table in the green room. What exactly was said is unrecorded, but if Robespierre and Couthon were criticised for the manner in which they had pushed through the Law of 22 Prairial, their colleagues cannot have seriously criticised the content, which reflected common policy. The
Committee of Public Safety was still an emergency wartime government; so if the Terror ended and the Constitution of 1793 came into effect, the Committee would be annulled. If this happened before sufficient measures had been taken to safeguard the Republic from its internal and external enemies, all would be lost and the Revolution would
have been in vain. Robespierre had taken the Terror to an extreme, but he had not departed from the basic principles from which the Committee of Public Safety drew its power. Serious clashes of personality and policy, however, fractured its unity of purpose. In particular, Robespierre clashed with Lazare Carnot, the army officer and stern
patriot who was responsible for the conduct of the war. After the recapture of Toulon the main focus of the foreign war was once again the frontier with the Austrian Netherlands. Carnot’s programme of mass mobilisation, combined with military reforms to integrate new recruits into a coherent fighting force, were beginning to show profit.
Back in Paris, however, the war was causing political conflict. In April, Carnot had called Robespierre and Saint-Just absurd dictators. He had quarrelled fiercely with Saint-Just over military issues. More recently, he had dispatched artillery units loyal to Robespierre to the front line. Robespierre suspected this was a deliberate ploy to get those
who would defend him, should the need arise, out of Paris. Since there were 700,000 armed men at the front, and a constant need for reinforcements, his suspicions may have been unfounded. There was no doubt, though, that Carnot was hostile to him.

Robespierre had enemies outside the Committee of Public Safety too. The
Committee of General Security, angry at not having been consulted over the Law of 22 Prairial, began scheming to expose the Incorruptible as a dictator. Many deputies in the Convention were now frightened of being sent before the Revolutionary Tribunal – especially those who had been called back in disgrace from their provincial
missions, among them Joseph Fouché and Jean Lambert Tallien, both notorious for their cruelty. Sensing so much ill-feeling, Robespierre increasingly withdraw from the Convention and from meetings of the Committee of Public Safety. Instead he turned his attention to running the Committee’s new Police Bureau, which he had taken over on 14 Floréal (3
May) when Saint-Just left Paris again to supervise the army in the north. Saint-Just had set up the Police Bureau one revolutionary week earlier on 4 Floréal (23 April), an act that caused immediate friction with the Convention’s other executive committee, the Committee of General Security, which had had responsibility for policing ever since it was first
established in September 1792. That committee had not been pleased when the Committee of Public Safety acquired the right to issue arrest warrants back in July 1793, but it was yet more threatened by the new Police Bureau.

Internal security – eradicating the insidious threat of the enemy within – had been a concern of
Robespierre’s from the outset of the Revolution. Now, in charge of the Police Bureau, he spent hour after hour assessing the reports of informers – sifting through the denunciations of unpatriotic enemies of the people pouring in from all over France. His small staff summarised each case for him, leaving a margin for his decision. This work must
have played on his worst nightmares. It forced him to confront on a daily basis the revolutionary question he found most tormenting: how could true and false patriots be distinguished? Who was more likely to look at a tree of liberty with indifference: the hypocrite or the real patriot? In some cases he dutifully asked for more information before making a
decision; in others he simply authorised an arrest. For example, when the mayor of Mont-Rouge was accused of *incivisme* or lack of public spirit during the local Festival of the Supreme Being, and more specifically of saying as he watched the celebrations ‘this rabble don’t wear underwear, see how they dance’, Robespierre directed, ‘Arrest the mayor of Mont-
Rouge and have Herman interrogate him.’ However, when the popular society of Valence denounced the quartermaster of the Armée des Alpes as immoral, Robespierre questioned the esprit of the popular society, and asked for more information on this point from his friend Payan.  

Increasingly Robespierre fell back on networks of
patronage – friends and friends of the friends whom he already knew (or thought he knew) as pure of heart, ‘au courant’ with his ideas and ‘one of us’.²² His landlord Maurice Duplay, for example, was appointed to the Revolutionary Tribunal. It is rumoured that once, when Duplay returned home, Robespierre asked him what he had been doing on the
Tribunal that day. ‘I have never tried to find out, Maximilien, what you do on the Committee of Public Safety,’ replied the carpenter correctly. Robespierre, in acknowledgement of Duplay’s irreproachability, silently shook his hand. But virtue like this was rare. Robespierre was now in a position to appoint a considerable number of
public officials to administrative jobs, but he knew comparatively few people and was soon running out of candidates. Some he summoned from Arras; his pre-revolutionary acquaintance Herman recommended to Robespierre another member of the Arras Criminal Tribunal: ‘I propose one Carron for your consideration … he is a good
sans-culotte republican, whom I consider to be one of us [que je crois propre à être avec nous].’

Robespierre’s’s printer Nicolas, the Duplays’ doctor Souberbielle and even their grocer Lohier also found themselves appointed to the Revolutionary Tribunal. The Duplays’ next-door neighbours at number 365, rue Saint-Honoré proved another source of loyal
personnel. Here lodged a hat merchant, Louis Emery, and a manufacturer, Didier Fillion, who were closely linked to a faction of Lyonnais Jacobins, ‘the friends of Chalier’ with whom Robespierre had been connected since his friend Marie Joseph Chalier was executed during the revolt in Lyon in 1793. Robespierre ended up appointing some members of this faction to
administrative jobs in Paris. The fact that a provincial faction gained such influence with him highlights the essentially domestic nature of his patronage networks. Politically, he relied on those he thought he could judge instinctively, and unsurprisingly they turned out to be his friends, his neighbours, the friends of his neighbours and so on. At the
end of one of Robespierre’s lists of potential candidates for appointment or promotion there is Saint-Just’s brother-in-law, described as ‘energetic, patriotic, pure, enlightened’. These were the personal attributes the Incorruptible most admired. To hostile eyes, his appointments look nepotistic, his values empty excuses for promoting friends and
acquaintances into positions of power. To him, this seemed the only way of finding upright, trustworthy patriots for all the urgent jobs that needed doing. He wanted to surround himself with people who believed as he did that ‘Duty comes first when it comes to serving the Republic.’ But his labours in the Police Bureau were a daily reminder that such
people were difficult to find, very few and far between.

By now there were unmistakable signs that Robespierre would soon turn on the deputies in the Convention whom he considered corrupt. Two in particular stood out: Tallien and Fouché. Both had been recalled from their missions to quell the counter-revolution after perpetrating
infamous atrocities: Tallien in the Vendée and Bordeaux; Fouché in Nevers and Lyon. After the successful repression of Lyon, authorised by the Committee of Public Safety, Fouché remained behind in the city. His attempts to continue and even extend the repression with new excesses of brutality had led to conflict between him and ‘the friends
of Chalier’, who thought it was time for local Lyonnais patriots to resume control. Tallien for his part had felt personally menaced even before the Law of 22 Prairial was passed. His mistress, Thérésa Cabarrus, had been arrested earlier in the month. She was a twenty-one-year-old Spanish girl who had been married to a French nobleman at the age of
fifteen. Tallien had met her when he was organising the Terror in Bordeaux, spared her life, fallen in love with her and brought her back to Paris. In his small, fastidious handwriting, Robespierre himself had written out the warrant for Therezia’s arrest. Considering that France was at war with Spain and the revolutionaries regarded ex-nobles as intrinsically
suspicious, the arrest of Tallien’s mistress may not have reflected personal animosity on Robespierre’s part. But Tallien was convinced it did. Similarly, Fouché, a militant atheist, knew he was loathed by the Incorruptible. While on mission, he had vigorously overseen the ransacking of the churches in Nivre, and delighted in having the motto
that Robespierre so hated, ‘Death is an eternal sleep’, inscribed on the cemetery gates. More recently he had dared to jeer openly at the Festival of the Supreme Being. In addition to these personal reasons for hostility towards Fouché, Robespierre was encouraged to move against him by ‘the friends of Chalier’, who now that Fouché had been recalled to
Paris openly hoped he might be sent before the Revolutionary Tribunal and guillotined.\textsuperscript{27}

In her memoirs, Charlotte Robespierre claims that she was present during the bitter conversation between Robespierre and Fouché that took place when the latter returned from Lyon.\textsuperscript{28} She says her brother severely reproached Fouché for all the
bloodshed he had caused in the Republic’s second city. Fouché trembled, went pale and babbled excuses for his cruelty. Robespierre told him there were no excuses for the crimes he was guilty of. True, Lyon had rebelled against the National Convention, but that did not justify killing crowds of unarmed civilians with grapeshot. According to Charlotte, Robespierre and
Fouché were enemies from this day. Earlier in the Revolution, Robespierre had thought Fouché a sincere patriot and stalwart democrat, and had even encouraged him to court Charlotte. Too beady-eyed to be swept up in a fanciful romance, Charlotte had understood immediately that Fouché was simply hoping to further his career by aspiring to become
Robespierre’s brother-in-law. She told him coldly that the idea of marrying him was not ‘repugnant’ to her, and she would, of course, be guided by her brother. Fouché withdrew his interest, and later Charlotte felt she and Maximilien had been equally duped by this ‘hypocritical, treacherous man without convictions, without morality, capable of doing anything to
satisfy his wild ambition’. Her account is biased as so often, but the souring of relations between Robespierre and Fouché that she describes certainly occurred. Robespierre may have thought Fouché had gone too far in Lyon, but he himself was not innocent of the bloody repression – indeed, through his connections with ‘the friends
of Chalier’ he was seriously implicated in the city’s politics – much more so than Charlotte knew or understood.

At the Jacobins on 23 Prairial (11 June), when the infamous law was just one day old, Robespierre indignantly denounced Fouché for preaching atheism. The next day in the Convention he warned of a
new faction trying to infiltrate the Mountain Jacobins: ‘a member of the Mountain is a pure, reasonable, sublime patriot’; nothing could be worse for the country or the people, he insisted, than a plot to corrupt his own supporters. One deputy, Léonard Bourdon, a fervent supporter of de-Christianisation, sensed that, along with Tallien, Fouché
and several others, he was being threatened without being named, so interrupted Robespierre to ask outright if he was calling him a scoundrel. ‘I demand, in the name of the country, not to be interrupted. I have not named Bourdon; shame on him who names himself.’ Then Robespierre continued with words to the effect of ‘if the cap fits wear it’, whereupon
another voice cried, ‘Name them!’ ‘I will name them when it is necessary,’ he replied, meaning if and when he could be sure of arresting and guillotining them. He continued speaking in vague abstract terms about the false patriots conspiring night and day to destroy the Mountain. He appealed to the Convention for unity and called on it to support the
Committee of Public Safety: ‘Give us your help; do not permit anyone to come between you and us, since we are a part of you and nothing without you. Give us the strength to carry the immense burden, almost beyond human effort, that you have imposed on us.’

Tallien interrupted him to say that he and another deputy had been mocked in the street: the
people no longer thought of them as their representatives. Robespierre turned on him – that was not true, he insisted; but what was true was that Tallien himself now spoke endlessly of using the guillotine as something to degrade or menace the Convention. According to Robespierre, he had recently said: ‘They want to guillotine us, but first we are going to
guillotine them.’ By this point, what members of the general public thought of the Convention was entirely beside the point. What Robespierre and Tallien were really arguing about was the fact that under the Law of 22 Prairial, the Convention’s three hundred or so deputies were no longer immune from arrest and execution. Robespierre had just made it
clear to anyone still in doubt that Tallien’s name was on his latest list of proscriptions.

Some of the atheists and supporters of de-Christianisation, whom Robespierre so hated, decided to try and strike him before he struck them. It was obvious that a scandal would destroy his career, established
as it was on personal purity. But there were no scandals where the Incorruptible was concerned, so one would have to be fabricated. There was at that time an old woman in Paris who had been arrested many times under the Old Regime, and even interrogated in the Bastille at one point, for describing the extraordinary visions she had. Catherine Théot had grown
up a serving-girl in a convent. Convinced that she was destined to be the second virginal mother of God, she prophesied the final coming of the Messiah and was still expecting to give birth to him well into her eighties. Alternatively she predicted his sudden appearance near the Panthéon amid flashes of lightning. She was almost certainly insane, but since the
Revolution her sect of devoted followers had grown – those were, after all, times of tremendous turmoil and insecurity. One of her followers was an ex-monk, Dom Gerle, who had lodged with the Duplays before Robespierre did, had been a member of the National Assembly, and more recently had tried to involve himself in planning the worship of the
Supreme Being. This Dom Gerle had close links to Robespierre’s most intimate circle, and recently the Incorruptible had been instrumental in obtaining him a certificate of *civisme* (or public spirit).

These were the raw materials from which the Incorruptible’s enemies in the Convention’s Committee of General Security tried to
concoct an embarrassing scandal. That they were driven to such desperate measures is testimony to the aptness of Robespierre’s nickname. Théot was arrested on 23 Floréal (12 May), just five days after Robespierre asked the Convention: ‘Who commissioned you to announce to the people that God does not exist?’ Then, on 27 Prairial (June 15), Marc
Guillaume Albert Vadier, an atheist deputy, read a report on the Théot sect (renaming it the Theos sect by a clever slip of the pen) in the Committee of General Security. Later he planned to back up the report with the news that under Théot’s mattress the police had found a letter dictated but not written by the illiterate and partially paralysed old woman that congratulated
Robespierre on all he had done – by restoring belief in God – to prepare the way for her forthcoming son the Messiah. The timing of this report was no accident: it was three days after Robespierre had publicly menaced Tallien and Fouché. According to one account Vadier went to the green room in the old Tuileries palace the evening before he delivered his report,
and announced what he intended to do the next day in the Committee of General Security. Robespierre was mortified. Unsurprisingly a row ensued, Vadier called Robespierre a tyrant, and Robespierre, with tears of anger in his eyes, said, ‘I’m a tyrant, am I! Well, I shall release you from my tyranny and come here no more.’

And that was the last time he
attended the Committee of Public Safety. This story is exaggerated. Robespierre remained president of the Convention until 1 Messidor (19 June) and in the following week he signed a great many documents in the Committee of Public Safety. After this he does seem to have withdrawn. But it is certainly true that within just a few weeks of appealing to
the Convention to unite behind the Committee in its awesome task of saving the Republic, he effectively distanced himself from both bodies and fell back on the older sources of his political support: his friends in the Paris Commune and, of course, the Jacobins.

Whether or not he absented himself from Committee meetings,
Robespierre was still a highly influential member of the government, and as such he succeeded in preventing the trial of the Théot sect. Fouquier-Tinville was sent for in the middle of the night and told by Robespierre himself that the trial was not to go ahead. The public prosecutor informed Vadier and the other conspirators that: ‘He, he is against it,’
which can hardly have come as a surprise to them. What was surprising, indeed frightening, was that one man had this power to impose his will on the Convention and its Committee of General Security, even when he was personally embattled in the smaller Committee of Public Safety. Robespierre’s formidable power derived from both formal and
informal sources: his reputation for patriotism, patronage networks, revolutionary experience, official responsibilities, control of the Police Bureau, popularity at the Jacobins and support in the Commune. But taken together these do not add up to the powers of a dictator. Nevertheless, this was how his enemies perceived him. And when he
quashed the trial of the Théot sect, he did indeed appear dictatorial. Soon afterwards, Robespierre’s supporter in the Commune, Claude Payan, wrote urging him to secure his victory over the conspirators with a denunciation of fanaticism. Payan, like Saint-Just and Robespierre, was interested in the possibility of centralising moral as well as physical
government. But these were long-term objectives. Much more pressing was the need to eliminate the faction in the Convention that had dared to strike at Robespierre.

Two days after the atheists failed to embroil the Incorruptible in their fabricated scandal, there was a terrible scene at the guillotine, even by the standards to which Paris had
become accustomed (not for nothing had the royalist abbé Maury, back in 1791, warned against depraving the people by familiarising them with the sight of blood). It was now two and a half revolutionary weeks since Cécile Renault’s confused attempt to assassinate Robespierre, and the days were getting warmer with the approach of mid-summer.
The inhabitants of the rue Saint-Honoré must have been relieved that the guillotine was still positioned outside the city centre, so they no longer had to contend with the noise and stench of the crowd accompanying the tumbrils past their doorsteps every day. As a result, Robespierre probably did not see his would-be assassin on her way to execution on 29
Prairial (17 June). She was accompanied by her father, brother and aunt, along with a random assortment of other prisoners, all clothed in the red shirts of parricides. Before the Revolution, Robespierre had written his first essay for the Academy of Arras against the tradition of bad blood. Under the Old Regime, the concept of guilt by association, used to
implicate a criminal’s entire family in their shame, had been repugnant to him. Had it lost its horror for him under the Republic? No wonder people began to suspect him of wanting to become king when they saw Cécile Renault and her family go by, costumed for their execution.

Also among the prisoners that day were three members of the outstandingly good-
looking Sainte-Amaranthe family: a widowed mother and her two children aged nineteen and seventeen. It was unclear why. The Sainte-Amaranthes were acquainted with the Duplays and a story went round that Robespierre had been to dinner at their house, got uncharacteristically tipsy, spoke somewhat indiscreetly about his political intentions,
and so had the whole family condemned to death to keep them quiet. But there is another story to set against this. Allegedly, on the night that Vadier went to the Committee of Public Safety to announce his forthcoming report on the Théot sect, he also threatened to propose the indictment of the Sainte-Amaranthe family. ‘You will do no such thing,’ said
Robespierre imperiously. ‘I will,’ retorted Vadier. ‘I have plenty of evidence.’ ‘Evidence or not, if you do so I shall attack you,’ came the Incorruptible’s reply. If the first story suggests he was a ruthless tyrant, the second suggests this was exactly how his enemies wanted to make him appear.

Another prisoner among the sixty-one executed in that
appalling throng was the underage servant girl of someone who had once been mistress to an Hébertist. When her small body went under the guillotine there were cries of ‘No children!’ from the crowd, whose depravity, despite everything, still knew some bounds. We will never know for sure if 29 Prairial was the revenge Robespierre demanded for a
supposed attempt on his life, or if those actively plotting his downfall staged it against his will. His friends and his enemies can choose the version they prefer.

Two days after these executions, Robespierre ceased to be president of the Convention and turned his attention to reorganising the Police Bureau. The Committee of Public Safety
agreed to increase the number of staff under him, ordering them to work every day from 8.30 a.m. to 3.30 p.m., and if necessary in the evenings too. Despite this, the paperwork remained chaotic and Robespierre testily complained on 5 Messidor (23 June) that: ‘The absence of dossiers that are mentioned but often found to have gone astray perhaps stems from the
poor organisation of the Bureau, which means that the dossiers are not put back where they should have been.’³⁴ He had always been fastidious. He lost his temper when he could not put his hand on the file he needed. It was a great relief when Saint-Just came back from the army in the north and took over the Bureau again at the end of June. Then Robespierre could
stay all day in his orderly room at the Duplays’, and Saint-Just could run round the corner and straight up the outside staircase to ask his advice if he needed it.

During this period, the number of people guillotined grew steadily. The sixty-one who died on 29 Prairial set a gruesome new record. It was soon surpassed on 19 Messidor (7 July) when sixty-
seven were executed, and almost equalled on 21 Messidor (9 July) when a further sixty went under the guillotine. Fouquier-Tinville, the public prosecutor, was often summoned in the night to receive his orders for the next day. He said there were ghosts that trailed him on those dark walks; gruesome ghosts appearing in defiance of the argument against
clemency that Barrère presented to the Convention: ‘It is only the dead who never come back.’ In the month that followed, there were only four days on which fewer than twenty-eight people were executed: one of these was a decadi – a revolutionary day of rest – and another was the fifth anniversary of the fall of the Bastille. The Police Bureau
shared joint responsibility for this bloodshed with the Committee of Public Safety and the Committee of General Security. It is impossible to know exactly how the responsibility was divided, but implausible that none of it was Robespierre’s. Yet when he fell from power, those who pushed him gave not his extremism but his moderation as their reason for
doing so. The atheist Vadier, for example, accused him ‘of having endeavoured to save from the scaffold the enemies of the people, and of having officiously interfered with Fouquier-Tinville to suspend the execution of conspirators’. Vadier may have meant the Sainte-Amaranthe family, over whom he and Robespierre allegedly quarrelled, but there
were perhaps others the Incorruptible also wanted to save.

When Saint-Just arrived back in Paris and burst through the doors of the Committee of Public Safety on the night of 10 Messidor (28 June), Robespierre was immensely relieved for both personal and political reasons. Saint-Just
brought exciting news. The Revolutionary Army had just won a decisive victory against the Austrian army at Fleurus in Belgium. In doing so, it had secured the road to Paris against the foreign enemy. The battle of Fleurus was the first in history to be won by making use of air surveillance. The French sent up a manned air-balloon, tethered to the ground by two
long cables, and in this way observed the enemy’s tactics from on high. The Committee of Public Safety received Saint-Just’s news nervously. Recently it had had to move to a new room on the top floor of the Tuileries palace, so that its violent rows could not be overheard if the windows were open because of the stifling summer heat. It was a war government.
Once the war was won, there were sure to be calls for a return to constitutional government. Back in 1791, an air-balloon trailing tricolour ribbons above Paris had announced the inauguration of the ill-fated constitutional monarchy. Many now thought the air-balloon floating over the battle of Fleurus should herald the institution of the long-
postponed republican constitution of 1793. Robespierre, for all his differences with his colleagues on the Committee of Public Safety, did not want to see the war government disbanded until all the internal, as well as external, enemies of the Revolution had been dealt with. In this he was supported by his friends in the Commune and the
Jacobin Club, and by Saint-Just and Couthon on the Committee of Public Safety. It was at the Jacobins that Robespierre had always been surest of himself. There on 21 Messidor (9 July) he tried to define patriotism – the heart of virtue and the cornerstone of the dream republic he was still fighting for. His fatigue and disillusionment showed in his speech: ‘There are few
generous men who love virtue for itself and ardently desire the happiness of the people,’ he admitted with resignation, obviously numbering himself among the few. Reaching imaginatively back to the beginning of the Revolution, he recalled that Necker, Louis XVI’s chief minister, with whom he had once been invited to dine in Versailles,
was a tyrant in his own home. Nothing astonishing there – a man who lacks public virtue cannot have private virtue either, remarked the Incorruptible. Similarly the Girondin minister Roland, married to that pretty woman so much younger than himself, displayed the kind of false virtue that Robespierre considered ‘diametrically opposed to heroism’ and
humanity’. Then there was Hébert secretly trying to destroy the liberty of France, and the moderate Dantonists endangering the safety of the Revolution. Now there was a new plot against the revolutionary government and Tribunal, to which the Jacobins must alert the Convention.

Robespierre was terribly tired. He urged the Jacobins
to be suspicious, to hold fast to their principles, to fight on against the Revolution’s internal enemies: so pernicious and yet always so hard to identify. ‘It is necessary always to return to these principles: public virtue and supreme justice are the two sovereign laws under which all those charged with the interests of the country must bow.’

His words and
themes were what they had always been, but much of the vigour had gone. Did any of the Jacobins still bother about Necker or Roland? Why did Robespierre think their names might stir his audience when so many terrible things had happened since the fall of the monarchy? Everyone knew he had more immediate enemies now, and the time was fast approaching when he
must move against them or
die at their hands. ‘I will
name them when I must,’ he
had told the Convention
weeks ago. The confrontation
was long overdue, and still he
continued with swirling
abstractions, first principles,
the public expression of his
own private conscience, his
pride and his purity.

The fifth anniversary of
the Bastille’s fall was
imminent. How would Paris – traumatised, frightened, disillusioned – celebrate? Some of the city’s sections organised fraternal banquets (*repas fraternels*): simple communal meals – ‘a bit of cold beef, a plate of haricots verts and a salad’ – consumed outside in the street on the warm, bright summer evening. A number of Robespierre’s closest
associates saw no harm in these alfresco meals: François Hanriot, his friend in charge of the National Guard, Martial Joseph Armand Herman, his friend on the Revolutionary Tribunal, and Claude Payan, his friend in the city’s Commune, all took part in them. Robespierre did not. He celebrated the anniversary of the Bastille’s fall by attending the Jacobins,
as usual, and trying for the second time to denounce Fouché. Here he was sure as ever of acting impartially for the public good: ‘I begin with the declaration that the individual Fouché interests me not at all.’ What, he asked, was Fouché afraid of? ‘Is it perhaps the eyes and ears of the people? Is it perhaps that his wretched face proves him too clearly
the author of a crime?" 42

What crime did Robespierre mean? He specified it only in vague terms at the very end of his speech: ‘These men have used the terror to force patriots to keep silent; they have put patriots in prison because they dared break their silence. This is the crime of which I accuse Fouché.’ 43

This was enough for the Jacobins, and they
immediately expelled the ferocious promoter of de-Christianisation whom Robespierre so hated.

Two days later Robespierre criticised the fraternal banquets, reminding the Jacobins that the time for fraternity had not arrived when so many internal enemies still remained. Those who called for an end to revolutionary government in
the wake of the battle of Fleurus were false patriots, since Robespierre was convinced the banquets and conspiracies were closely linked. Together beneath the clear blue sky at the Festival of the Supreme Being the people had been united, grand, sublime. But divided into little groups, seated round trestle tables, they were vulnerable to the schemes of
intriguers: ‘How indeed could one mistrust a man with whom one has drunk from the same cup, on whose lips one has encountered the language of patriotism?’ Even at this point in the Revolution, the shattered symbolism of the Catholic Mass retained enough power to make it worth fighting over. Robespierre asked the Jacobins to consider whether
those who drank from one cup at the fraternal banquets were sincere in expressing unity with the people. ‘Share my fear,’ he had urged the Jacobins in the past. Now he tried asking them again. His associates who had misread the signs and participated in the banquets wrote grovelling letters excusing themselves: ‘Judge, judge what I must suffer at the thought of
having involuntarily contributed to placing those instruments of mischief in the hands of our enemies,’ wrote one abject member of the Revolutionary Tribunal.  

Soon after, another member of the Tribunal, Joachim Vilate, who had given Robespierre breakfast on the morning of the Festival of the Supreme Being, made a list of those whom the
Incorruptible was soon to proscribe. Robespierre’s colleague on the Committee of Public Safety, Bertrand Barère, dictated it – why is a mystery. Even more of a mystery is why Vilate left the list lying on a desk in his charming apartment in the Pavillon de Flore, overlooking the Tuileries gardens, where the trees that shed their leaves early in the
year the monarchy fell now sweltered in the heat. The list was still there a few days later on 3 Thermidor (21 July) when the Committee of General Security arrested Vilate. The list is lost, but the names of Fouché, Tallien, Vadier and other members of the Convention probably figured on it. By now there were no walls thick enough, no rooms sufficiently high or
soundproof, to conceal the personal and political differences tearing the Convention and its two committees apart. Saint-Just and Barère tried to act as peacemakers. Twice they convened joint meetings of the Committee of Public Safety and the Committee of General Security. Robespierre, now practically a recluse except when at the
Jacobins, went to the second of these meetings, on 5 Thermidor (23 July). He was cold and reserved – nothing new – but left his friends and enemies alike with the impression that he was prepared to compromise, that some headway had been made toward uniting the two committees. But he never did compromise. In his thirty-six years there are no examples,
except, just possibly, when he agreed to the death of Danton. Compromise, to Robespierre, was corruption – the betrayal of his absolute principles, the stars by which he had steered his extraordinary political career.

After the meeting, he went off on his own. Secluded in his room above the carpentry yard, he wrote for three days and nights
preparing the text of his last speech. He consulted no one, not even Saint-Just. Perhaps he was offended by the younger man’s opening to compromise inside the Committee of Public Safety, or perhaps, however close they seemed to outsiders, Robespierre had kept something back from even this, the most significant of his personal and political
alliances. On the morning of 8 Thermidor (26 July) he got dressed carefully, as he always did, drank coffee, and went out for the first time in days. It was a very short distance to the Convention. There he spoke for two hours — sincerely, passionately, truthfully — explaining what he had done in the Revolution and why. Who knows if before he opened his mouth
the unwelcome thought crossed his mind that it was precisely this privilege – this opportunity to defend himself before the Convention – that he and Saint-Just had denied Danton? ‘I am going to unveil the abuse that is bringing about the ruin of the country – the abuse which your probity alone can repress.’

This was his familiar vocabulary. His audience had
heard him say such things before. This time was going to be different.

The French Revolution is the first to have been founded on the theory of the rights of humanity and the principles of justice. Other revolutions required nothing but ambition;
ours imposes virtue. Ignorance and power absorbed the others in a new despotism; ours, emanating from justice, stands alone. The Republic, led insensibly by the force of circumstance and by the struggle of the friends of liberty against continually reborn conspiracies,
has slid, so to speak, through all the factions ... it has been persecuted constantly since its birth, as have the men of good faith who have fought for it. And so, to preserve the advantage of their position, the heads of the factions and their agents have been obliged to hide
themselves behind the edifice of the Republic ... All the deceivers have adopted, each more convincingly than the last, all the formulas and all the rallying words of patriotism.  

Here was the problem that had driven Robespierre mad: how can you tell a sincere
man in politics? When the language of those who work for the public good is so easily adopted by those who work only for themselves, who can tell a true from a false patriot? And how? Robespierre, absolutely sincerely, did not see himself as the leader of just another faction. He saw himself as one of the persecuted: someone who had fought for
the Republic against ‘tyrants, men of blood, oppressors of patriotism’. After his death his enemies turned the very same words against him – he became the tyrant, the man of blood, responsible for the worst excesses, if not the entire system, of the Terror. He would not have been surprised. The slipperiness of language, that great gulf between what is said and
what is true, was precisely what he complained of in this last of his astonishing speeches.

He went on to defend the actions of both the executive Committees. Each had only charged people – it was the Revolutionary Tribunal, in the name of the Convention, that had actually condemned them. Quite why Robespierre thought there was a valid
distinction to be made between charging and condemning people under the Law of Prairial is a difficult question to answer. He was personally implicated in passing the infamous law that transformed the Revolutionary Tribunal’s work into something still more brutally perfunctory. Was this pure hypocrisy? Complete self-delusion? Or
did he, insanely, believe that a true patriot would have been acquitted by the Revolutionary Tribunal despite everything? By now he knew for sure that innocent people had died. The best he could come up with was to say: it was not my fault, not even the fault of the Committee I sat on: it was the fault of the Convention to which I now appeal. His
strategy was not admirable, but he did think his claim was true. Moreover, he believed there was a case for continuing with the Terror: ‘The guilty complain of our rigour – the country, more justly, complains of our weakness.’

Robespierre’s was a characteristically personal speech. He spoke of the calumnies against him: they
were ridiculous, who could believe that he wanted the Convention ‘to cut its own throat with its own hands’ and so open the bloody path to his own dictatorship? ‘The monsters who charge me with such insanity are the real cut-throats who meditate the sacrifice of all the friends of their country.’ It hurt him deeply ‘to become an object of terror’ to the people he
loved and revered:

They [the real conspirators] call me a tyrant. If I were one, they would grovel at my feet. I would shower them with gold and they would be grateful. When the victims of their perfidy complain they excuse themselves by
saying, ‘Robespierre will have it so.’ To the nobles they say, ‘He alone persecutes you.’ To the patriots they say, ‘Robespierre protects the nobles.’ To the clergy they say, ‘He’s the one persecuting you.’ To the fanatics they say, ‘He’s the one who destroyed religion.’
All the grievances that I have tried in vain to redress are still imputed to me – ‘He did all of it’ – ‘He won’t prevent it’ – ‘Your fate is in his hands alone.’ Spies are hired and stationed in our public places to propagate these calumnies. You see them at the sittings of
the Revolutionary Tribunal. You find them round the scaffold when the enemies of the people expiate their crimes – you hear them saying, ‘These are the unhappy victims of Robespierre.’ Above all, they strive to prove that the
Tribunal is a tribunal of blood, created and guided by me alone ... When a deputy on mission to a Department is recalled, they tell him it is I who recalls him. Obliging persons have been found to attribute to me more good than I have done in order to impute to me mischief
in which I had no hand. They kindly repeat to my colleagues everything that I happened to say, and, above all, everything that I did not say. If any measure of the Government was likely to displease anyone, it was I who did all – exacted all –
commanded all! It was never to be forgotten that I was the dictator. 50

‘You see, it is always me,’ Robespierre had complained to his colleague Bertrand Barère in a bookshop earlier that year: always him whom people blamed. Why was he surprised? He identified
himself with the Revolution. He had insisted over and over again in the Estates General, the National Assembly, the Jacobins, the Commune, the Convention, and the Committee of Public Safety that there simply was no distinction: he was the living embodiment of the eternal principles upon which the Revolution was founded. Of course people blamed him for
its excesses and failures. In his own mind, Robespierre had slid (as he put it) with the Revolution past all the factions that had tried to possess it for their own corrupt purposes. He and the Revolution had remained pure, and together they had eluded all those grasping, egotistical hands that sought to sully his beautiful dream of a just and virtuous
democracy. Now, inevitably, he thought the time had almost come to move against the latest set of conspirators:

You will ask who are the authors of this system of calumny [against himself] – I answer, in the first place – the Duke of York – Mr Pitt [the British Prime
Minister] and all the tyrants who are in arms against us. But who next? [Long dramatic pause.] Ah! I dare not name them at this moment and in this place – I cannot bring myself to a resolution to tear away altogether the veil that covers this profound mystery of
Everyone in the room had a good idea who he meant: Fouché, Tallien, Vadier and perhaps even Barère, among others. Not naming but only alluding to them at this point in his speech was extremely imprudent, leaving the whole Convention to tremble with fear. Whatever did he hope to
achieve by it? In his isolation, perhaps he had failed to recognise that the time for insinuation at the Convention was long since past, now none of the deputies felt safe from the Tribunal. Terrified and divided, they spent their days whispering the names of the soon-to-be-proscribed along the benches. Many had stopped sleeping at home, scared of a knock on the door
in the middle of the night and an arresting hand on their shoulder. Now Robespierre, last seen in the Convention on 24 Prairial, two days after the infamous law was passed, had reappeared, speaking with devastating passion, but stopping short of actually naming names. Saint-Just, hearing only at the last minute what Robespierre intended to do, probably
rushed to the Convention to watch his friend bare his soul and expose both their lives. Sitting there listening, he would have felt like putting his head in his hands in a gesture of black despair. Camille Desmoulins had once jeered at him for carrying his beautiful head about like a sacred host, but those days too were gone.

Robespierre even hinted
that the list on Vilate’s desk was part of the plot against him: ‘Inoffensive, ordinary people are tormented and patriots are every day cast into dungeons. Have not even members of the Convention been designated as victims on secret and odious lists of proscription? Has not this imposture been propagated with such combined artifice and audacity that a great
number of deputies have not ventured to sleep in their own residences?" Next he discussed the plot to make him look ridiculous by association with Catherine Théot. Then he gave heartfelt thanks to the Convention for supporting his new religion of the Supreme Being:

Immortal thanks to the Convention for that
decree, which is in itself a revolution and has saved the country. You have struck with the same blow atheism and priestly despotism! ... You have won over to the Revolution every pure and generous heart! ... Oh day forever fortunate! When the French people rose all
together to offer to the Author of Nature the only homage worthy of him, what a touching assemblage was there of all the objects that can fascinate the eyes or attract the hearts of men! Oh honoured old age! Oh generous and ardent youth! Oh pure and playful joy of
childhood! Oh delicious tears of maternal fondness! Oh divine influences of innocence and beauty! Oh the majesty of a great people, happy in the contemplation and enjoyment of its own strength and glory and virtue!\textsuperscript{53}
If anyone had been in any doubt that the Festival of the Supreme Being was the happiest day of Robespierre’s life, they were no longer. Remembering it, he was moved to pray aloud in the Convention: ‘Being of beings, was the day on which the universe came forth from your creative and almighty hands brighter or more acceptable to your eyes than
that recent day when the first People of the world, bursting the bonds of crime and error, appeared before you worthy of your favour and of its own destiny?’ The best of his friends must have wondered what on earth he thought he was doing. What had ‘delicious tears of maternal fondness’ got to do with the desperate crisis he found himself in? French mothers
had wept ever since the Revolution began – Marie Antoinette had appealed to them when the Revolutionary Tribunal accused her of child abuse. The mothers of those lynched in the street, the mothers of those killed in battle, the mothers of those massacred in prison, the mothers of those sent to the guillotine – who could find their tears delectable? For the
last time Robespierre publicly described his vision of the Republic as he thought it should be. The reality – as he was the first to admit – was far removed. Finally he turned on his enemies:

… No, Chaumette, no, Fouché! Death is not an eternal sleep. The French people will not submit to a desperate
and desolating doctrine that covers nature itself with a funeral shroud – that deprives virtue of hope, and misfortune of consolation, and insults even death itself. No; we will efface from our tombs your sacrilegious epitaph, and replace it with the consolatory
Interestingly, and in the face of plentiful hints to the contrary, Robespierre did not feel himself close to death at this point. As usual, he announced that he was more than willing to sacrifice his life for the Revolution. And
as Danton had done when close to the end, he claimed life had become a burden: ‘Why should I regret escaping from the eternal torture of seeing this horrible succession of traitors, who, concealing the turpitude of their souls under the veil of virtue, and even of friendship, will leave posterity in doubt which was the greater, their cowardice or their crimes?’
His conclusion was a self-referential remark of superb insight: ‘I was made to oppose crime, not to control it.’ He knew and understood himself as no biographer ever could. However, when the Convention discussed its response to his two-hour address, Robespierre was genuinely shocked that it turned against him. Instead of immediately lauding, printing
and circulating his speech, the Convention referred it to the committees of Public Safety and General Security. He had serious enemies on both. He tried to protest: ‘What! My speech is to be sent to be examined by the very deputies I accuse!’ And so, in one spontaneous sentence, he suddenly revealed what he had tried to bury so carefully in the text of his long, bizarre
oration. He had returned to the Convention to swing it against its own committees; there was no further need for him to name the conspirators – their identities were clear to everyone listening.

Pierre Joseph Cambon, head of the Finance Commission and one of the few ‘monsters’ mentioned by name in Robespierre’s speech, was the first to
denounce him. He began by defending himself and other members of the Finance Commission against Robespierre’s implicit charges of corruption and conspiracy, but then he went a step further and announced: ‘It is time to tell the whole truth: one man is paralysing the National Convention; that man is the one who has just made the speech; it is
Soon afterwards Barère intervened to distract everyone with a buoyant speech about recent military victories and the Republic’s bright future. Barère’s purposes were unclear — and his feelings about Robespierre at best ambivalent — but he succeeded in deflecting the immediate crisis, and there was no call for Robespierre’s
If Robespierre decided not to consult Saint-Just before he made his speech because he thought his friend might try to talk him out of it, he was right. Saint-Just thought the way forward was to work with, not against, the committees, which, after all, still formed the locus of revolutionary government. Robespierre’s unilateral and
unmistakably personal intervention had seriously damaged any chance of compromise. That evening, Robespierre, accompanied by Couthon, went off to the Jacobins to make sure the club rallied behind him. But Saint-Just went alone to the Tuileries palace and sat in the meeting room of the Committee of Public Safety. Perhaps he had not yet
decided what to do. Because he had played such an important role on mission to the army, and been present for the decisive battle of Fleurus, his revolutionary identity was not simply conflated with Robespierre’s. They had been, and still were, personally and ideologically close. They meant the same thing by the reign of virtue and were passionately
committed to realising it in France. But if Robespierre was going to fall, there was a good chance that Saint-Just might save himself. Wondering what was going on round the corner at the Jacobins on that warm summer evening, wondering if compromise might still, even now, reunite the two committees, Saint-Just must have turned over in his mind
the possibility of betraying the Incorruptible.

Meanwhile at the Jacobins things were, as usual, going in Robespierre’s favour. Despite some initial opposition, he succeeded in rereading his speech to the club. At the end he declared that it was his last will and testament and, identifying now with Socrates, said: ‘If you forsake me see how
calmly I shall drink the hemlock.’ At this the artist David, who was very emotional and had once rushed on to the floor of the Convention baring his chest for the blades of Robespierre’s would-be assassins, shouted: ‘I will drink it with you.’ (David, who had been close to the Incorruptible for a long time and deeply involved in
designing the Festival of the Supreme Being, survived his fall and lived to be Napoleon’s painter too.) Most of the other Jacobins also backed Robespierre. They turned on Collot d’Herbois and Billaud-Varenne, two of his hostile colleagues on the Committee of Public Safety, and drove them from the club. The pair, furious and humiliated, stormed off to the
Tuileries palace, where they found Saint-Just sitting at the Committee’s table, bent over the text of his speech for the following day. Carnot, Barère and some of the other members of the Committee were there too. There was another loud quarrel — they had become a habit. Finally Saint-Just, ‘cold as marble’, agreed to submit the draft of his speech to the Committee
before reading it to the Convention the next morning. Having secured this promise, Collot d’Herbois and Billaud-Varenne set off to reassure Fouché, Tallien and the other deputies who were afraid of being proscribed by Robespierre. Saint-Just sat on in the committee room until 5 a.m. – he felt the insults of his colleagues branding his soul. When he left at last, he went
to find Robespierre.

Maybe Robespierre persuaded him. Maybe Saint-Just had already decided. But whatever he was thinking as he ascended – perhaps with a heavier tread than had been his wont – the outside staircase that led directly to the Incorruptible’s room, he no longer believed in compromise with the committees when he came
back out. On that beautiful summer morning he did not submit to the Committee of Public Safety, as he had promised to do, the draft of the speech he intended to deliver to the Convention. Instead he sent his colleagues a dramatic note: ‘You have seared my heart: I intend to open it to the Convention.’ Saint-Just, who had wavered, had thrown in his lot with
Robespierre and that morning would see a fight to the death. Leaving the Duplay household for what everyone knew might be the last time, Robespierre turned to his host and said: ‘Don’t be alarmed, the majority of the Convention is pure; I have nothing to fear.’ Saint-Just, pasty from his sleepless night, went out with him, carrying the amended speech.
Together they entered the Convention, where Couthon and Robespierre’s brother were waiting for them. Fouché, Tallien, Bourdon and others determined to bring down Robespierre were there too, rallying moderate or undecided deputies to their cause. Unfortunately for Robespierre and his supporters, Collot d’Herbois happened to be the current
president of the Convention. He was going to help Tallien and the others stop Saint-Just and Robespierre speaking.

Saint-Just began. He had scarcely finished his first sentence when Tallien interrupted, complaining that, like Robespierre the day before, the speaker had isolated himself from the committees and spoke only for himself. It was true that
Saint-Just’s speech had not been sanctioned by the Committee of Public Safety, still less the Committee of General Security. Before Saint-Just could resume, Billaud-Varenne described how he and Collot d’Herbois had been expelled from the Jacobins the evening before. He accused Robespierre directly of plotting against the Convention. At the tribune,
Saint-Just froze. He had stood there before and never trembled when he delivered those razor-sharp interventions on the fate of Louis XVI and later Danton.

‘The words we have spoken will never be forgotten on earth,’ he had announced so proudly. Now, suddenly, he could find no more words. Robespierre saw and ran forwards to interrupt Billaud-
Varenne. But his enemies were prepared for this and by prearrangement shouts of ‘Down with the tyrant!’ rang out round the hall. No one could hear Robespierre in the tumult. From the chair, Collot d’Herbois ignored his requests to speak, and instead allowed Tallien to do so again. Every time Robespierre tried to interrupt, cries of ‘Down with the
tyrant!’ deafened him.

After Tallien, who proposed arresting Hanriot (Robespierrre’s friend at the Commune), among others, it was Vadier’s turn. Vadier chose this moment to reveal that a letter implicating Robespierre in the Catherine Théot sect had been found under the old woman’s mattress at the time of her arrest. He developed this
ridiculous line of attack until Tallien stopped him irritably: ‘I demand the floor to bring the discussion back to the real point.’ ‘I could bring it back’, yelled Robespierre with all his might, making his voice heard at last in the fight. But they would not let him. ‘It is the blood of Danton that chokes you!’ someone shouted, remembering that Robespierre, in his time, had
prevented others from speaking, as he now wanted to. ‘Danton! Is it, then, Danton you regret? Cowards! Why did you not defend him?’ yelled Robespierre as the din broke over his voice again and silenced it.  

They voted for Robespierre’s arrest. Augustin at once asked to be arrested with his brother and no one objected. Next they
attacked the crippled Couthon, ‘thirsty for blood’ and hoping ‘to make of our corpses so many steps to mount the throne’. ‘Oh yes! I wanted to get a throne,’ said Couthon, gesturing at his wheelchair with bleak irony. Finally Saint-Just and Robespierre’s friend Lebas were arrested too. The five were assembled before the bar and had to listen to a
moralising speech from Collot d’Herbois, the Convention’s far from neutral president. They were probably still in shock. They all knew what failure meant in a time of revolution. Robespierre and Saint-Just had theorised, justified and legalised the draconian punishment of death for anyone who failed the Revolution. Both
had said they did not value life in and of itself: ‘I despise the dust that forms me and speaks to you,’ said Saint-Just before his eloquence deserted him.\textsuperscript{63} Now they really were very close to death. Despite everything, it came as a surprise.

When news of the events in the Convention reached the
Commune, it rose in support of Robespierre. The city gates were closed and the tocsin rang out from the Hôtel de Ville as it had before the fall of the monarchy and later the Girondins. Armed men began assembling and dragging out any cannons that had not yet been sent from Paris to the front line. Robespierre’s friend Hanriot, who had also been threatened with arrest,
ordered the city prisons to refuse admittance to prisoners sent by the Convention. Meanwhile the Jacobins went into permanent session, periodically sending messages of support to the Commune throughout the night. The problem was that the Commune did not have complete control over the city’s forty-eight sections, many of which disregarded
the orders they received. Some sections went further and came out in support of the Convention. By 10 p.m. that evening, only thirteen of the forty-eight had sent armed men to the Hôtel de Ville to fight for Robespierre. Where was he? Hanriot had set off to find out and discovered the five arrested deputies in the rooms of the Committee of General Security, where they
had been given dinner. When he arrived, Hanriot was arrested too, so that made six. For some reason, Lebas was allowed to go home, watch the police seal his papers, and say goodbye properly to his wife Élisabeth and their newborn son. Afterwards he was taken to the prison La Force, where he joined Augustin, whom the prison Saint-Lazare, following
orders, had refused to admit. Robespierre was taken to the Luxembourg, close to the flats where Danton and his wife and Camille and Lucile Desmoulins had lived. Couthon was wheeled to the Bourbe, and Saint-Just escorted to the Écossais. Hanriot was still at the Tuileries palace when an armed deputation from the Commune arrived to liberate
him. Unexpectedly, this proved quite easy.

The Convention had just begun its evening session when news arrived that the men it had arrested earlier in the day were at large again: none of the prisons had wanted to detain them in defiance of orders from the Commune. Indeed, Robespierre had been spotted getting out of a cab with a
white handkerchief over his mouth (perhaps he had been sick on the journey) and walking into the Mairie, where he fell into the arms of the mayor’s staff. They reassured him that he was still among friends. Augustin had given a speech at the Commune. And by 1 a.m. all five, together with Hanriot, were at the Hôtel de Ville waiting for the insurrection to
begin. Robespierre had hoped to avoid a resort to violence, would have preferred a proper opportunity to win the Convention round, but eventually he was persuaded that, in the circumstances, there was no alternative. The Convention’s committees responded by declaring the prisoners outlaws, to be taken dead or alive and executed without trial. And so
Robespierre and his friends became hunted men, just as the Girondins had been a year before. But unlike the Girondins, who had fled Paris and scattered throughout France, Robespierre and his accomplices remained in a single room in the Hôtel de Ville. From here they sent out rousing proclamations to the Paris sections and arrest warrants for their enemies in
the Convention. Robespierre’s own section was to receive the following:

Courage, patriots of the Pikes Section! Liberty is winning the day! Those men whose constancy made them feared by the traitors have already been released. Everywhere
People is showing itself worthy of its reputation. The rallying point is the Commune, where the brave Hanriot will carry out the orders of the Executive Committee [Robespierre and friends] that has been set up to save the country.
Signed:
Lerebours, Legrand, Louvet, Payan, Ro ...

Robespierre’s signature is incomplete and the document is blood-splattered. There is dispute about whose blood made the stains. Some historians think it was Robespierre’s own. According to one version there he was, carefully adding
his signature, when the door flew open and soldiers sent by the Convention fired at him, shattering his jaw and knocking him forward bleeding on to the document. The soldiers had got past the Commune guards by guessing their not very difficult password: ‘Vive Robespierre!’ Other, more sceptical historians think the blood could be just about
anyone’s, may not even have got on to the paper during the early hours of 10 Thermidor (28 July), and there will never be a proper explanation for Robespierre’s broken signature. He was, after all, in a pretty catatonic state even before half his jaw was shot off – perhaps he broke off his signature simply to be sick again, and, since there was so much going on, never got
back to complete it. What is certain is that soldiers from the Convention did burst into the room, and one way or another Robespierre suffered a bullet wound that shattered his jaw. The most likely explanation for this outcome is a bungled suicide attempt. When the soldiers came for them, Augustin escaped through a window and edged his way
along a ledge overlooking the square below, holding his shoes in one hand, holding on with the other, but slipped suddenly and smashed on to the steps outside the Hôtel de Ville, to the horrified amazement of the people assembled there for the insurrection. An eyewitness observed that ‘the body had fallen on a sabre and a bayonet, and knocked down
the two citizens who carried them’. He was picked up later, half dead. Hanriot jumped, or was pushed, through another window on the third storey of the building, which overlooked an inner court. He landed in an open sewer and was found there several hours later, covered in excrement, in horrendous pain, and begging to be finished off. Couthon,
who could not walk, pulled himself out of his wheelchair, only to fall down a staircase and cut his head open. Lebas, the only one who had been home since the defeat in the Convention, had two pocket pistols on him. He handed one to Robespierre and blew his own brains out with the other. Robespierre, who had probably never fired a gun in his life, may have tried to do
the same, but pulled the trigger too soon with a very shaky hand. Saint-Just, cold as marble, sat there like a statue, waiting.

Lying on a plank, Robespierre was carried back to the Committee of Public Safety between one and two in the morning. He was bleeding profusely from the wound to his left lower jaw. He tried to stop the blood
flow by pressing with a white leather pistol-bag. Later someone noted the words inscribed on it: ‘Lecourt, gunmaker to the king and to the army, Rue St Honoré, near the Rue des Poulies, Paris.’

Probably it was the bag for the pistol that Lebas gave Robespierre to shoot himself with – it might still have been in his left hand after he had pulled the trigger with his
right. He was only semiconscious by the time his rough stretcher was carried up the stairs of the Tuileries and put down on a table in the antechamber to the Committee's meeting room. Someone placed a small box, containing samples of bread intended for the army in the north, under his head as a pillow. He was unconscious for an hour or so and seemed
unlikely to last the night. But around three or four in the morning he opened his eyes again and tried to remove some of the blood from his mouth with the pistol-bag. At one point someone handed him some sheets of paper for this purpose. The leather bag must have been too soiled to be of further use. At about 6 a.m. a surgeon was called in to dress the wound. Two or
three teeth were extracted and the shattered jaw was bandaged tightly. Sometimes Robespierre looked steadily at the people around him, but mainly he looked up at the ceiling. He made very little noise even though he must have been in terrible pain. Suddenly he sat bolt upright on the table. He pulled up his stockings, which were hanging down round his
ankles, stood up, crossed the room and seated himself in a vacant armchair. He was wearing the same sky-blue coat he had worn for the Festival of the Supreme Being. Fastidious to the end, he asked for some clean linen.

At 9 a.m. Couthon was brought to the Tuileries, also on a makeshift stretcher – or, possibly, in a wheelbarrow.
Before he was carried up the grand staircase, Collot d’Herbois, Billaud-Varennes and Barère, who were all inside the committee room, decided to send the prisoners to the Conciergerie. By this time, Saint-Just, in much better physical shape than his friends, had joined them. He stood motionless before the framed copy of the Declaration of Rights that
hung in the antechamber to the Committee of Public Safety. Finally he raised his arm, pointed and said composedly: ‘And yet it was I who did that.’

It was true. He had helped draft the democratic constitution of 1793 that never came into effect. Robespierre was carried down the stairs in the armchair he was sitting in. Legend has it he struck at the
men carrying him, but it seems very unlikely he had the strength left. 67

Later that morning, what was left of the five deputies who had stood before the bar of the Convention the previous day, been arrested, escaped, and been hunted through the night, was at last assembled before the Revolutionary Tribunal. Augustin may have been dead
already; Lebas certainly was; and Couthon and Robespierre were both physically mangled. Only Saint-Just remained on his feet. The five were joined by seventeen other prisoners considered loyal to the Incorruptible, including Hanriot. Outside, the carts were already waiting for them, and the guillotine had been brought back into the city centre and
reassembled in the Place de la Révolution especially for the occasion. By early evening, enormous crowds filled the streets and the banks of the Seine. Everyone wanted to see Robespierre go past.

There was not much to see. The bandage covered most of his face. He showed no emotion and closed his eyes. Perhaps he opened them again when he felt the cart
suddenly jolt to a halt. They had stopped outside the Duplay house on the road that led to the guillotine. The windows were all closed, as they had been on the days that Louis XVI, then afterwards Danton, passed that way. Amid all the terrible jeering and bitter rejoicing, someone threw a bucket of animal blood against the bolted outer door. Mme
Duplay was not behind it; she was in prison, where she later killed herself. Eléonore Duplay might have been at home – afterwards they called her the Widow Robespierre. One witness saw a woman in the crowd pull herself up on the railing of the cart to curse the Incorruptible face to face: ‘Monster, spewed up from hell. The thought of your punishment intoxicates me
with joy.’ He looked at her sadly as she added, ‘Go now, evildoer, go down into your grave loaded with the curses of the wives and mothers of France.’

The carts at last moved on. The first contained the Robespierre brothers and Hanriot; Saint-Just was in the second, and Couthon behind in the third. Some of the condemned had to be carried up the scaffold, but not
Robespierre. He went last but one, ascending the steps on his own: a frail figure in sky blue. If he looked around when he got to the top, he would have seen the Tuileries, from which, just six weeks ago, he had emerged so proudly as the high priest of a new religion. His coat came off. Just before they strapped him to the plank, they decided to rip off too the
bandage that was holding his face together. Perhaps the executioner – so experienced by now – thought the bandage was thick enough to get in the way of the descending blade; perhaps he wanted to be cruel. Robespierre screamed. It was the deep, sharp cry of a man in excruciating pain that you hear sometimes in hospitals – the violent protest of a wounded human animal.
that, however brave or bent on self-control, cannot stop the voice of torment. Anyone who has ever heard a man scream knows how Robespierre sounded then.

The scream was the last act of the man who had tried as no one else did to embody the Revolution. It was the point of severance, when Robespierre’s precious vision of a democratic republic, pure
and founded on virtue, finally left him. Pain flooded his mind and he dropped, for the first time in over five years, that mysterious picture of what he wanted to achieve in politics. A ‘tenacious’ man, Danton had called him. And indeed, he carried his vision right to the end, only surrendering it in those last few seconds before he was guillotined. Perhaps it went
out into the world on the back of that scream. It is certainly true that friends and later followers of Robespierre in France, and elsewhere, tried to keep fighting for it, as he would have done. And some of them are still trying, for all the damage inflicted on left-wing political dreams by the collapse of communism across Europe and beyond. But the vision itself has never
been clearly understood: a democracy for the people, who are intrinsically good and pure of heart; a democracy in which poverty is honourable, power innocuous, and the vulnerable safe from oppression; a democracy that worships nature – not nature as it really is, cruel and disgusting, but nature sanitised, majestic and above all good. ‘The end of
the Revolution is the triumph of innocence,’ Robespierre believed. Many of those claiming to be inspired by his vision have shared it only in part. The most honest always admit that there is something peculiar and elusive about it. If the vision was entirely clear to him – as he sat alone in his room at the Duplays’, as he walked out in the countryside with his dog, or
as he lay there on the table in the Tuileries staring up at the ceiling through the long last night of his life – he never succeeded in making it so to others. One historian described that scream as ‘the end of the bright hope for a democratic Republic’.\(^{71}\) Others hear it as a rallying cry to continue the fight. As a biographer, I hear it as the agonised separation of
Robespierre and the Revolution: the man and what he lived for. When it finally came to it, what was pushed under the guillotine on 10 Thermidor (28 July) was as limp, frail and meaningless as a puppeteer’s marionette. The real severance had already happened – it happened when he screamed and the picture in his mind went blank.
Coda

A few days later, in England, the poet William Wordsworth was crossing Morecambe Bay after visiting the grave of his former schoolteacher. Like his compatriot, the
agronomist Arthur Young, Wordsworth had travelled in France on the eve of the Revolution, and he too had been to Arras in 1789:

I paced, a dear companion at my side,
The town of Arras, whence with promise high
Issued, on delegation to sustain
Humanity and right, that
Robespierre
He who thereafter, and in how short a time!
Wielded the sceptre of the Atheist crew.

Wordsworth resented that memory of joy and hope in the streets of Arras. It seemed to mock him in the wake of all the horror and bloodshed that the Revolution brought with it. Wordsworth had seen
some of it for himself. He was there watching at the Convention in 1792 when Louvet rose like a spectre before the tribune and said, ‘Yes, Robespierre, it is I who accuses you!’ He wrote about it afterwards, and about the storming of the Tuileries palace, the royal prisoners in the Temple tower, the September massacres, the war and the Revolutionary
Tribunal. It is all in Book 10 of *The Prelude*. It was in Morecambe Bay that he heard the news of Robespierre’s death:

As I advanced, all that I saw or felt
   Was gentleness and peace. Upon a small
   And rocky island near, a fragment stood
   (Itself like a sea rock)
the low remains
(With shells encrusted,
dark with briny weeds)
Of a dilapidated structure, once
A Romish chapel, where
the vested priest
Said matins at the hour that suited those
Who crossed the sands with ebb of morning tide.
Not far from that still ruin in the plain
Lay spotted with a variegated crowd

Of vehicles and travellers, horse and foot,

Wading beneath the conduct of their guide

In loose procession through the shallow stream

Of inland waters; the great sea meanwhile

Heaved at a safe distance, far retired. I paused,
Longing for skill to paint
a scene so bright
And cheerful, but the
foremost of the band
As he approached, no
salutation given
In the familiar language
of the day,
Cried, ‘Robespierre is
dead!’…

Wordsworth uttered a
hymn to everlasting justice on
those open sands. He was among the first to get Robespierre completely wrong. How could he call him, of all things, the leader of ‘the Atheist crew’? How could he not know that the small, ruined, shell-encrusted chapel would have moved the Incorruptible? Robespierre too would have liked the procession of simple working or travelling people, their
horses and their motley vehicles. He, like Wordsworth, might have longed to sketch the scene. For he too loved nature in all its majesty – even though, so far as we know, he never once saw the splendour of the sea.
Louis XVI in coronation robes
Arras ‘city of a hundred steeples’ in the mid-eighteenth century
Robespierre’s house in Arras, where he lived as a young lawyer
Robespierre as a young man in the costume of a delegate to the Third Estate
Robespierre’s sister
Charlotte, who kept house for him before he left Arras
The procession of the opening of the Estates
General at Versailles
The Tennis Court Oath
The Siege of the Bastille
Inside the Jacobin Club
Robespierre in his room at the Duplays
Robespierre: Incorruptible
Legislator
The Triumvirs: Rœderer-Pétion-Robespierre, who
remained in the Jacobin Club after it split in 1791
Eléonore Duplay: a self-portrait
The execution of Louis XVI
The Departments of France created during the Revolution
Louis Lafitte: The Twelve Revolutionary Months: Vendémiaire, Brumaire, Frimaire, Nivôse, Pluviôse, Ventôse, Germinal, Floréal, Prairial, Messidor, Thermidor, Fructidor
Robespierre at the Tribune
Jean-Jacques Rousseau on a
playing card of 1793
‘All mortals are born equal, it is virtue that makes the difference,’ 1793
The Desmoulins family: Robespierre’s godson Horace at the centre
Marat – L’Ami du Peuple
Saint Just: ‘The words we have spoken will never be forgotten on earth.’
Danton with his hands tied on his way to execution
The destruction of the statue of Atheism at the Festival of the Supreme Being
French surveillance by air-balloon at the Battle of Fleurus
Robespierre in the Convention, 9 Thermidor
Robespierre lying wounded in the antechamber of the Committee of Public Safety
COMMUNE DE PARIS.

Le Comité d'Éducation

Leg. Therrière

Courage, patriotes de la SECTION DEULIGEC, la liberté triomphera. J'ajoure que nous ferons obtenir, formidables aux traités de nos armes, liberté, pource l'oppression démontre digne de son caractère.

Le Saut de Rémuneration asta commune sous le pouvoir du Comité exécuter, en ce jour, la courante d'Éducation qui est fait pour remuer l'opulence.

[Signatures]
Insurrectionary summons to the Section des Piques – Robespierre’s final, incomplete, signature
Notes

References are given using the Harvard notation system.

Preface
Introduction

2 Rœderer (1853–9) vol.3, pp.270–1. Rœderer’s depiction of Robespierre was based on personal
acquaintance and first published under the name Merlin de Thionville in 1794.


3 O’Brien (1837), pp. 6–7.


5 M. Bloch, quoted in Haydon and Doyle (1999), p. 212.
When the Maison Robespierre was purchased by the City of Arras in 1990, the town council decided to entrust its refurbishment to the Compagnons de France, who would receive in payment for their work the right to use part or all of the house. Les Amis de Robespierre pour le Bicentenaire de la
Révolution (ARBR), a society established in Arras to ensure that Robespierre’s contribution to the Revolution is not overlooked, campaigned hard to retain space for a small museum to him. The ARBR continues working today to raise Robespierre’s profile in Arras and beyond. See http://www.amis-
8 Dumont (1832), p.250.
9 There is dispute over whether Robespierre’s famous sky-blue coat was different from the blue coats worn by the other deputies to the National Convention as their official dress. Vilate
12 For a summary of the dispute about the decor of Robespierre’s room at the Duplains’ see M. Cumming, in Haydon and Doyle (1999), pp.180–1. Also Jordan (1985), p.58.
Chapter 1: Child of Arras

1 On Arras see Bougard (1988) and Héricourt and Godin (1856).


3 Paris (1870), p.17.
4 Palmer (1975), p.43.
5 Proyart (1803), p.220.
10 Palmer (1975), pp.70–1.
12 Palmer (1975), p.84.
Little is known of the childhood acquaintance of Robespierre and Camille; one source says they were neither rivals nor close friends because their age difference meant they were not in the same school class: [VC], p.3.
Chapter 2: The Lawyer-Poet Back Home

1 Paris (1870), p.18. This institution was founded by Marianne and Joseph Manarre in 1674. It admitted deserving girls between the ages of 9 and 18, who were taught to read, write, sew and make
lace.


3 Robespierre (1910–67), vol.3(a), p.25.


5 Robespierre (1910–67), vol.3(a), p.27.

6 Robespierre (1910–67), vol.1, p.241; Laponneraye (2002), p.106. Charlotte Robespierre implies that this was a later poem,
composed during the Revolution.

7 Robespierre (1910–67), vol. 3(a), p. 22.


11 See Riskin (1999); also Huet (1989).

The term ‘l’être suprême’ was a
well-established way of referring to God in Christian vocabulary since the 17th century. Later in the Revolution Robespierre imbued it with new meaning: see Deprun (1972).

20 Thompson (1939), pp.22–3.

21 Rœderer (1853–9), vol.3, p.9.

The story of Charlotte’s disapproval was told to Sainte-Beuve by an old
bookseller named Isnard, who had previously taught at the Collège d’Arras.


33 Robespierre (1910–67),
Joseph Garat remembered that during the Revolution Robespierre kept *La Nouvelle Héloïse* open on his desk as a literary and oratorical model, Proyart (1850), p.224.


Chapter 3: Standing for Election in Arras
1. Doyle (1990), p.76.
3. Lamoignon (1787), p.3.
12 The municipality of Arras traced its origins back to the 11th century.

13 Stage 1 was elections by parish, corporation or quartier, stage 2 was the town assembly, stage 3 the secondary bailliage assembly (Artois was divided into 7 bailliages), and stage 4 the principal bailliage assembly from which the final delegates
of the Third Estate would be chosen.

14 The most notable was Gracchus Babeuf.


16 Robespierre (1910–67), vol.6, p.18, gives the precise composition of this assembly.

17 Proyart (1850), pp.42–3.

Chapter 4: Representing the Nation at Versailles

1 Pierre L’Enfant, who designed the 1791 street plan for Washington DC, had spent time in Versailles as a child.
2 Young (1929), p.151.
4 La Morandière in 1764,
quoted in Corbin (1986), p.27.

5 See Alison Patrick’s article in Blanning (1996), pp.236–66, for a full explanation of how and why the number of deputies fluctuated. Also Tackett (1996).

6 Ferrières (1932), p.34.

7 Ferrières (1932), p.43.


10 Dumont (1832), p.144.
16 Doyle (1990), p.94.
17 Rousseau (1962), vol.1, p.255.
18 Robespierre (1910–67), vol.3(a), p.41.
Aulard (1889–97), vol.1, pp.II–XVII. The history of the Breton Club is difficult to reconstruct and it is not clear when exactly Robespierre joined it.


Dumont (1832), p.64.


Mirabeau (1790), vol.1, p.15.

Dumont (1832), pp.60–1.
The deputy Reybaz, sitting next to Dumont, said this to him.
94.  
34 [NAR], p.25.
36 [NAR], p.28.
37 Doyle (1990), p.113.
38 Robespierre (1910–67), vol.3(a), p.45.
Mirabeau (1835–6), p.204.
51 [AP], vol.9, p.236.
52 Dumont (1832), p.140.
53 Dumont (1832), p.143.
54 Dumont (1832), p.146.
55 Dumont (1832), p.147.
56 Robespierre (1910–67), vol.6, p.58.
57 Robespierre (1910–67), vol.6, p.59.
58 Robespierre (1910–67), vol.6, p.61.
Desmoulins’ account of Marat’s involvement in the march to Versailles
was retrospective and possibly exaggerated.


69 Villiers (1802), p.5.

Chapter 5: The National Assembly in Paris
The house no longer exists. In his correspondence, Robespierre gives the address as no. 30, but for a summary of the dispute about how the house was numbered and where it was in the street see Thompson (1939), p. 65, and Michon (1924).

Villiers entrusted a friend with publishing his

5 Villiers (1802), p.2.
6 Villiers (1802), p.5.
7 Villiers (1802), p.3.
8 Villiers (1802), p.2.

One other scrap of possible evidence turned
up in 1909 in the form of a drawing of a woman by Claude Hoin, inscribed La dévouée Hortense Delannoye, maîtresse du traître Robespierre: see Thompson (1939), p.66.

10 On Robespierre’s relations with women see Fleischmann (1908) and Mantel (2000).

15. Villiers (1802), p.3.
20. Sieyès (1989), vol.2, s.11,

22 Robespierre (1910–67), vol.6, p.319.


26 Robespierre (1910–67), vol.3(a), p.82.

27 Villiers (1802), p.4.
English historians differ over whether to describe this building as a convent or monastery, but since the occupants were male, the latter seems more appropriate, even though the French word is *couvent*.

Initially Robespierre resisted officially adopting the name Jacobins,
because he thought it more pejoratively suggestive of factionalism than ‘The Society of the Friends of the Constitution’:


31 Robespierre (1910–67), vol. 3(a), p. 73.


33 Robespierre (1910–67), vol. 3(a), p. 82.
The identity of the priest is disputed: some say it
was Denis Bérardier from Louis-le-Grand, others that it was M. de Pancemont of Saint-Sulpice. The ceremony was a conventional Roman Catholic one, despite Camille’s facetious remarks about Christianity in his newspaper. One account of the wedding claims Camille was moved to tears by the ceremony,
and Robespierre said nastily, ‘Cry then, hypocrite!’: Paris (1870), p.26, and [VC], pp.4–6.


49 [A], vol.2, p.1121.
The deputy was Duquesnoy.
Chapter 6: The Constitution

1 Dumont (1832), pp.266–7.
2 [A], vol.3, p.1826.
3 Dumont (1832), pp.22–3.
4 Cabanis (1791), p.11.
5 Dumont (1832), p.310.
6 Cabanis (1791), p.60.
7 Robespierre (1910–67),
The last execution with the Halifax Gibbet was in 1648.


The advertisement appeared in *L’Orateur du peuple*, vol.6, no.18: see
Thompson (1939), p.138. There is no record of the speech being found.


26 Robespierre (1910–67), vol.6, p.611.

27 Robespierre (1910–67), vol.3(a), p.100.


29 Robespierre (1910–67), vol.7, p.266.
30 Wrigley (2002), pp.135–86.
33 [A], vol.5, pp.2745–51.
35 [AP], vol.25, p.201.
36 Croker (1857), p.121.
By one count, 17 petitions of this kind were drawn up.
between 17 and 21 July, and rejected out of hand by the Assembly: see Tackett (2003), p.113.

47 Thompson (1939), p.162.


49 Robespierre still gave his address as rue Saintonge on 9 August, which suggests a brief period of transition between the two lodgings: see Thompson (1939), p.178.
The fact that the Assembly voted to exonerate Louis XVI after the flight to Varennes is difficult to explain, given the fierce opposition to doing so from radical deputies like Robespierre, and hostile public opinion. The final vote on this issue was not recorded. See Tackett (2003), p.141.
exact date of the premature welcome party: see Walter (1989), p.204.

Chapter 7: War

By this point, the circulation
of major speeches had become customary, so the long debate provoked by Robespierre suggests the Parisian Jacobins were deeply divided over Brissot’s speech.

11 Doyle (1990), p.179.

13 Robespierre resigned his job as Public Prosecutor on 10 April 1792. The court to which he had been appointed only came into existence in February 1792, and he resigned before its first formal session. See Thompson (1939), p. 225.

14 Robespierre (1910–67),
vol.8, p.248.


18 Robespierre (1910–67), vol.8, p.165.


20 Guillaume Tell, a drama set to music by A.E.M. Gréty, was performed for
the first time at the Comédie-Italienne, Paris, on 9 April 1791. Voltaire’s *Brutus* was first staged in 1730, and was popular during the Revolution. M.J. Chénier’s *Caius Gracchus* opened at the Théâtre de la République on 9 February 1792.


Robespierre (1910–67), vol.4, p.92.


Robespierre (1910–67), vol.3(a), p.139.

Robespierre (1910–67), vol.4, p.34.

Robespierre (1910–67), vol.8, p.90.
Hardman (1999), p.34.
38 Madame Élisabeth (1868), p. 416.
40 Danton (1910), pp. 28–32.
41 Robespierre (1910–67), vol. 8, p. 313.
44 Robespierre (1910–67),
vol.4, p.9.

45 Robespierre (1910–67), vol.4, p.33.

46 Danton (1910), p.28.


48 Robespierre (1910–67), vol.8, p.163.

49 Robespierre (1910–67), vol.4, p.52.


51 Doyle (1990), p.185.

54 Croker (1857), p.185.
55 [AP], vol.45, pp.411–12.
56 Croker (1857), p.199.
61 Robespierre (1910–67),
Brunswick’s manifesto was dated 25 July 1792, reported in Paris on 28 July and published in *Le Moniteur* on 3 August.
Chapter 8: The King’s Trial
1 Mathiez (1921), p.83.
2 Thompson (1939), p.274.
3 Croker (1857), p.246.
4 Blanc (1847–69), vol.7, p.192.
6 Danton (1910), p.52.
11 Robespierre (1910–67),


13 Ferrières (1932), p. 43.

14 Of the 749 deputies elected to the National Convention, only 83 had sat in the National Assembly, compared to 200 who had sat in the Legislative Assembly. There was no self-denying ordinance this time
precluding members of the earlier assemblies from standing for election to the National Convention:


20 [A], vol.52, p.138.
22 [A], vol.7, p.3965.
23 [A], vol.8, p.4756.
24 [A], vol.8, p.4757.
25 [A], vol.8, p.4790.
27 [AP], vol.53, p.49.
28 [AP], vol.53, p.53.
30 [CP], 9 November 1792.
31 Walter (1946), p.634.
The one innocent victim to whom Robespierre meant to allude was an alleged case of mistaken identity.
41 [A], vol.5, pp.2649–50.
43 Robespierre (1910–67), vol.3(a), p.87.
vol.9, pp.121–2.


Robespierre (1910–67), vol.9, p.123.

48 Robespierre (1910–67), vol.9, p.89.


50 Robespierre (1910–67), vol.9, p.130.
51 Saint-Just (1908), vol.1, p.2.
53 [AP], vol.55, p.7.
vol.9, p.205.

58 Thompson (1939), p.308.


61 Robespierre (1910–67), vol.9, p.228.


63 Croker (1857), p.257.

64 Mme d’Angoulême, quoted in Croker (1857), p.257.
19 April 1770 was the date of Marie Antoinette’s marriage by proxy, a familiar practice where the marriage of a princess to a foreigner was concerned: see Fraser (2001), p.40. Her wedding in France took place later, on 16
May 1770.

Chapter 9: The Pact with Violence

2 30 March 1793, William Bentley Papers, American Antiquarian Society.
Later the Committee of General Security and the Committee of Public Safety sometimes intervened in making appointments to the Tribunal.
The armed bands that smashed the print shops where the Girondin journals were produced were in disguise, but probably organised by Jacques-René Hébert, a radical journalist and editor of the increasingly popular *Père Duchesne*.

For important recent work on the *comités de surveillance* see...
Guilhaumou and Lapied (2004).

10 The establishment of the Committee of Public Safety was preceded by a complicated sequence of short-lived committees of government. Between 4 and 25 March there was the Committee of General Defence, set up in response to the foreign and domestic crises. It was
succeeded by the Commission de Salut Public, which had 25 members, drawn from both the Mountain and Girondin factions. This was too large and disunited to function, and was finally replaced by the famous Committee of Public Safety on 6 April.

12 Robespierre (1910–67),


18 Thompson (1989); p.170.

19 Robespierre (1910–67),

21 [AP], vol.61, pp.624–5.

22 [AP], vol.62, p.34.


28 Robespierre (1910–67),
vol.9, p.541.

29 Thompson (1939), p.333.


34 [PF], no.1354.

35 Robespierre (1910–67), vol.9, p.112.
There is dispute about whether Robespierre had bodyguards. The Jacobins
living in or near his street often walked home with him, but this may only have been because they were going in the same direction.


47 Robespierre (1910–67),
Charlotte does not date this trip in her memoirs, but Augustin wrote to Buissart in Arras on 20 July 1793 telling him he had agreed to go on mission: Robespierre (1910–67), vol.3(a), p.176.
It was during this trip that Augustin and Charlotte first met Napoleon Bonaparte, who later gave Charlotte a state pension of 3,600 francs when he became Premier Consul: see Laponneraye (2000), p.113.


54 Robespierre (1910–67),

56 Lazare Carnot and Claude Prieur joined the Committee of Public Safety on 14 August, just over a fortnight after Robespierre; then Jacques Billaud and Collot d’Herbois joined on 6 September: Palmer (1965), p.4.
57  Carlyle (1848), vol.3, p.277.
60  [AP], vol.74, pp.303–4.
62  Croker (1857), p.263.
63  Croker (1857), p.263.
64  Croker (1857), p.264.
65  [M], vol.18, p.146.
66  Croker (1857), p.357.
70 Claretie (1908), pp. 194–5.
72 Croker (1857), p. 564.
73 [AP], vol. 77, p. 500.
74 Robespierre (1920), p. 3.
75 [AP], vol. 77, pp. 500–1.
77 Saint-Just (1908), vol. 2, pp. 492–536.
79 Thompson (1939), p.430.
82 Thompson (1939), p.428.
85 [VC], p.73.
86 [VC], p.75.
88 [VC], p.14.
90 [VC], p.20.
92 Aulard (1889–97), vol.5, p.603.


Williams (n.d.), p.128, describes Danton’s
conversations with prisoners in the Conciergerie.


02 Danton (1910), p.247.

03 Michelet (1979), vol.2, p.753.

04 Saint-Just (1908), vol.2, pp.305–32.
There is evidence to suggest that Robespierre’s notes were written in response to an initial draft of Saint-Just’s speech, in which case the collaboration between them was even more complex: Mathiez (1973), pp.121–56.


Desmoulins (1874),

08 Danton (1910), p.248.


10 Danton (1910), p.250.


12 Danton (1910), pp.259–64.

13 Danton (1910), pp.251–2.

14 [AP], vol.88, pp.151–2.


16 [VC], p.170.

17 Belloc (1910), p.336,
claims a Mme Gély was the source of this story. See also Claretie (1908), pp.285–6 (who assumes Danton was thinking of his wife when he muttered ‘I shall never see her again’), and Michelet (1979), vol.2, p.758.

Chapter 10: Robespierre’s Red
The title ‘Robespierre’s Red Summer’ is borrowed from Richard Cobb. See also Hardman (1999), p. 125.


Robespierre (1910–67),
On the extent of popular support for Robespierre’s new religion see Vovelle (1988).


Claretie (1908), pp. 259–
64. Thompson (1939), p.548.
22 Stéfan-Pol (1900), p.75.
26 Hardman (1999), p.182.
28 Robespierre (1910–67),
Relying on the Committee of Public Safety’s register Belloc (1927), p.315, claims Robespierre was only absent 6 times during the period between 22
Prairial and 9 Thermidor, but Thompson (1939), p.540, doubts the accuracy of the register and notes that Robespierre’s signature only appears 3 times on the Committee’s documents during this period.

33 Croker (1857), pp.400–1.
35 [AP], vol.87, p.100.
36 [AP], vol.93, p.553.
41 Hardman (1999), p.139.
44 Robespierre (1910–67),
vol.10, p.534.


50 Robespierre (1910–67),


56 Croker (1857), p. 413.
60 Saint-Just (1908), vol.2, p.332.
62 [AP], vol.93, p.555.
64 Croker (1857), p.423.
65 Robespierre (1828), vol.2,
It was rumoured that Robespierre had secretly married Eléanore Duplay with Saint-Just as a witness: Proyart (1850), pp.208–9.

Proyart (1850), p.210; Pernoud and Flaissier

70 Aulard (1889–97), vol.5, p.594.

71 Palmer (1965), p.381.

Coda

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With few exceptions (the holograph speech of 8
Thermidor in his own writing, for example), what is known of Robespierre’s political speeches is through newspaper reports that are subject to slight variations. These have been collated in the *Œuvres complètes*. On the day of Robespierre’s arrest, his close friend Eléanore Duplay hid what she could of his papers. Another member of the Duplay family, still
fearing recrimination in 1815, burnt them. The rest of his papers were seized, and E.B. Courtois was commissioned to present an official report on them to the Convention. In doing so, he suppressed a quantity of evidence that was later published.

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Robinson, Paternoster-row.

[PF] Patriote français, Paris (1793): [s.n.].

[R] Le Républicain, ou le défenseur du gouvernement représentatif par une société de républicains, 10 Jul. 1791–23 Jul. 1791. (Only four issues of this journal appeared, the first two published together on 10 Jul., the third on 16 Jul., and the fourth on 23 Jul.),
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Index

The page references in this index correspond to the printed edition from which this ebook was created. To find a specific word or phrase from the index, please use the
search feature of your ebook reader.

Académie Française, 170
Academy of Amiens, 43–4
Academy of Arras, 40, 43, 46–7, 50, 61, 68
Academy of Metz, 41, 42
Admiral, 293
Aire, 61, 115
Aisne, 120
Aix, 73
Altar of the Fatherland, 121,
122, 151, 152, 153, 154, 192, 193
America, 233
Revolution/War of Independence, 56, 76, 87, 88, 91, 123, 144, 174
Ami des Noirs, 147
Ami du Peuple, L’ (The People’s Friend), 95, 123–4, 152, 219, 257
Amiens, 44, 45
Academy of, 43–4
Antifédéraliste, 279
Archbishop’s Palace, Paris, 97, 204
Arcis-sur-Aube, 153, 194, 266, 285
Arles, Archbishop of, 199
Army Movement Commission, 278
Army of the Rhine, 274
Arras
attitudes to R’s memory in, 8
description of, 15–16, 61–
R’s family background in, 17
R born in, 8, 15, 17
R’s childhood and schooldays in, 18–20
biography of R published in, 25–6
R returns to, 31, 32
R’s early adult life in, 4, 32–51, 58–9, 60–1, 62–9
R identifies with fellow
delegates from, 76
local newspaper on R, 77
R’s brother wishes to leave, 122
R’s return visit to, 156–7, 161–4
R’s brother engaged in revolutionary activities in, 207
Wordsworth visits, 326
brief references, 90, 104, 108, 193, 266, 288, 300
Arras, Bishop of, 20, 112, 115
Artois, 60–1, 63, 64, 103, 107–8, 115 see also Arras; Council of Artois; Estates of Artois
Artois, Comte d’, 86, 90
Audrein, Yves-Marie, 26, 27
Austria/Austrians, 124, 143, 149, 174, 179, 236, 307
Austrian Netherlands, 233–4, 298
Auvergne, 76
Avignon, 192

Bacon, Francis, 42

Bailly, Jean Sylvain, 78, 82, 87, 88, 90, 110, 146, 153

Bapaume, 156–7, 193

Barère, Bertrand

brings debate at Convention to a close, 217

king interrogated by, 224

takes over as president of Convention, 227
member of Committee of Public Safety, 236, 254
and R’s feeling of being blamed, 292, 313
argues against clemency, 307
dictates list to Vilate, 310
deflects crisis about R in Convention, 316
brief references, 314, 317, 323
Barnave, Antoine, 85, 150,
Bastille
fall of, 83–4
deputies visit, 88–9
demolition of, 89
models made from stone of, 89, 97
first anniversary of fall of, 121–3, 289
second anniversary of fall of, 151
parade for festival in honour of
Châteauvieux soldiers stops at, 178
mob assembles at site of, 188
third anniversary of fall of, 192–3
fourth anniversary of fall of, 247
fifth anniversary of fall of, 309
Beaumarchais, 66
Beauvais, Bishop of, 199
Beccaria, Cesare, 40
Belgium, 234, 236, 307
Bentabole, 248
Bentley, William, 233
Bernard, Jacques-Claude, 279
Bertrand, Francis, 2
Besançon, Parlement of, 73
Béthune, 61, 141, 162
Bicêtre hospital, Paris, 202
Bicêtre reformatory, Paris, 199, 216
Billaud-Varenne, 254, 317, 318, 323
Bishop’s Court (Salle Épiscopale), Arras, 36, 39, 58
Blanzy, 49
Blérancourt, 120–1
Bordeaux, 246, 253, 301
Parlement of, 56
Bouillé, Marquis de, 141, 144, 145, 152, 169
Bourbe, Paris, 320
Bourbon alliance, 117
Bourdon, Léonard, 302, 318
Bourges, 246, 252
Brissot, Jacques discusses response to royal flight at Pétion’s home, 147, 148
background, 147
drafts petition calling for deposition of the king, 152
views on war, 165
R opposes views of, 166
accentuation of division
between R and, 167
gains political influence
and emerges as
leading advocate of a
republic, 171
R’s increasing hostility
towards, 172
openly calls for a
republic, 182
attacked by R, 182
R desires arrest of, 200
elected to National Convention, 206 division with R carried over to Convention, 213 proposes measures to diminish influence of Paris and its delegates, 226 weak position of, 237 R seeks to implicate, 238 appears before Revolutionary
Tribunal, 260–1
condemned to death, 262
Danton replies to questioning about, 285
brief references, 156, 173, 181, 205, 214, 233, 239, 268, 276, 282
see also Brissot faction/Brissot’s friends
Brissot faction/Brissot’s friends, 171, 172, 184–5, 186, 187–8, 191, 192,
198, 211 see also Girondins; names of individuals

Britain/the British, 104, 257 see also England

British Columbia, 116–17

Brittany, 76, 77–8

Brunswick, Duke of, 193–4, 199, 200, 203, 242

Buissart, Antoine ‘Barometer’, 37, 40, 43, 44, 45, 66

R’s letters to, 74, 76, 82,
83, 85, 86, 90, 103–4, 116, 164, 193
Buissart, Mme, 156
Buonarroti, Philippe, 176
Burke, Edmund, 163
Cabanis, Dr, 127, 129, 130
Cabarrus, Thérésa, 301
Caen, 246, 247
Café Amaury, Versailles, 77, 78, 114
Café de Foy, Paris, 83, 86
Cambon, Pierre Joseph, 236,
Camille see Desmoulins, Camille

Capet, Hugues, 229

Capet, Louis, 236, 259, 293
as Dauphin, 93, 95, 118, 144, 145, 195, 224

Capetian dynasty, 229, 293

Capucins, Convent of the, Paris, 189

Carlyle, Thomas, 254

Carmelites, Convent of the, Paris, 199
Carnot, Lazare, 250–1, 254, 278, 298–9, 317
Carrault, Jacqueline Marguerite (later Jacqueline Robespierre; R’s mother), 17–18
Carrault brewery, 32
Carrier, Jean Baptiste, 277
Carvins, 16, 34–5, 67
Catherine de Médicis, 118
Catherine the Great, 233
Cercle Social, 138–9
Chalier, Joseph, 256, 300
Champ de Mars, Paris, 121–3, 151–2, 155, 169, 178, 185, 187, 188, 192, 202, 296

Massacre, 153–4, 161, 167, 170, 182, 186, 193, 285

Chapel of Calvary, Arras, 163–4

Charles I, King of England, 106

Charles Edward Stuart, the Young Pretender, 17
Chartres, 261
Châteauvieux soldiers, 141–2, 177–8, 188
festival in honour of, 178–9
Châtelet, Paris, 199
Chaumette, Pierre Gaspard, 267, 279
Cherubini, Luigi, 139
Christianity, 112, 223–4
Chronique de Paris, 116, 139, 215
Church, 17, 80, 111–14,
Citizens
distinction between active and passive, 107, 149
non tax-payers excluded from National Guard, 107, 140
distinction abolished, 203
Civil Constitution of the Clergy, 112–13, 115, 126, 130, 140, 143, 149, 163, 184
Clavière, Étienne, 171, 172, 198
Clergy, 29, 56, 60, 65, 68, 71, 72, 74, 75, 78, 79, 81, 82
Coblentz, 162, 166
Collège d’Arras, 19–20, 21, 65
Collège Louis-le-Grand see Louis-le-Grand, Paris
College of Surgeons, 134
Collot d’Herbois, 254, 256, 277, 293, 294, 317, 318,
319, 323
Commission for Civil Administration and Police, 288
Committee of Clemency, proposed, 270
Committee of General Security, 236, 258–9, 281, 284, 297, 299, 304, 305, 307, 310, 316, 318, 320
Committee of Justice, proposed, 270
Committee of Public Safety
creation of, 236–7
members of, 236, 254
and suspension of new
constitution, 246–7
Danton voted off, 253
R elected to, 254
policy of repression
against Lyon, 256, 258–9
shares control of
Revolutionary Tribunal, 258–9
decrees separation of Louis Capet from his mother, 259
gains more control through Law of 14 Frimaire, 269
Camille Desmoulins appeals to R to redirect policy of, 270
orders Fabre d’Églantine’s arrest, 272
R demands vote of confidence for, 276,
lack of agreement among members on how to save Revolution, recommends formation of new executive commissions, official publication (*Antifédéraliste*), adds Danton’s name to list of the proscribed, and arrest of Danton, and charge against
Dantonists, 284
persuaded to recall Saint-
Just, 294
clashes in, 298
R’s withdrawal from, 299, 304
R calls on Convention to support, 303
and execution of Sainte-
Amaranthe family, 306
agrees to increase staff at Police Bureau, 306
joint responsibility for bloodshed, 307
receives news about Battle of Fleurus, 307–8
R defends actions of, 312
Convention refers R’s speech to, 316
Saint-Just agrees to read draft of speech to, 317
Saint-Just does not submit draft to, 318
R and companions taken
to, 322–3
brief references, 250, 266, 290, 297, 305, 310, 311, 313
Commune de Paris, 109, 110
see also Insurrectionary Commune
Conciergerie, Paris, 254, 259, 261, 323
Condé, Prince de, 125, 162
Condorcet, Marquis de, 37, 215, 228, 244, 290
Conseil d’Artois (Council of
Constitution

Third Estate hopes for, 79
debates about, 91, 93, 96,
104–14, 149
formally accepted by king in September 1791,
155
failure of (1791–92), 159–230
discussion of new republican
constitution, 244, 246
redrafted and ratified in 1793, 246
suspended, 246, 254
and hopes for institution after battle of Fleurus, 308
and Saint-Just, 323
see also Civil Constitution of the Clergy;
Declaration of Rights
Constitutional Committee, 244
Convention see National
Convention
Cook, Captain, 116–17
Corday, Charlotte, 247–8, 250
Cordeliers Club, 110, 143, 150, 152, 153, 180, 188, 216, 249, 257, 265, 266, 269, 277, 278
Cordeliers, monastery church of the, Paris, 110, 194
Cordeliers, rue des, Paris, 248
Cordeliers district, Paris, 109, 110
Coronelli, 25
Couci, 121
Council of Artois (Conseil d’Artois), 36, 37, 43, 55
Courier français, 93
Courtrai, 192
Couthon, Georges
R writes to, 193
on committee to redraft republican constitution, 246
on Committee of Public Safety, 254
argues for resettlement of people of Lyon, 256
and Law of Prairial, 297, 298
supports R’s views about continuation of war
goverment, 308
arrested, 319
after arrest, 320, 322–3
taken to guillotine, 324
brief references, 164, 277,
317, 318
Crinchon, river, 15
Croker, John Wilson, 1–3, 134
Cult of the Supreme Being
see Supreme Being
Cunosse, Mélanie, 2

Dalibard, M., 38
Damiens, Robert-François, 132–3, 201
Danton, Gabrielle, 234, 253
Danton, George Jacques
and king’s coronation, 29
activism as member of Commune, 109
clashes with Lafayette over organisation of Paris, 109
and formation of Cordeliers Club, 110
opposes departure of king to St Cloud, 143
reads petition calling for deposition of king, 152
flees from Paris, 153
opinion on likelihood of
war, 171
at outbreak of war, 179–80
returns to Paris, 180
R compared with, 180, 183
death of wife, 183–4
R’s letter to, 184
and insurrection in August 1792, 194, 195
becomes Minister for
Justice, 198
and September massacres, 200
ensures withdrawal of arrest warrants for R’s personal enemies, 201
urges on patriot volunteers, 202–3
elected to National Convention, 206
at official opening of Convention, 208
defends R at Convention,
211 and Louvet’s attack on R, 213–14
and Marat’s election, 216
and decision to kill the king, 227
goes on mission to armies in Austrian Netherlands, 233–4
persuades Convention to revive Revolutionary Tribunal, 234–5
meets Dumouriez, 236
chosen as member of Committee of Public Safety, 236
suggests Revolutionary Army to requisition food supplies, 237
Girondins ask questions about, 238
voted off Committee of Public Safety, 253
remarries, 253
clashes with R’s views, 253–4
limits number of meetings of Paris sections, 257, 265
calls for Revolutionary Army to act against foreign enemy, 257–8
becomes increasingly critical of regime of Terror, 265–6
goes to Arcis with family, 266
returns to Paris, 268
R speaks at Jacobin Club
in support of, 268–9

Desmoulins dedicates newspaper to R and, 269

Desmoulins feels protected by R and, 270

intervenes in argument between R and Desmoulins, 271–2

and East India Company, 273

advocates clemency, 273,
objects to singing in the Convention, 278
R signs arrest warrant for, 280
refuses to flee, 280–1
arrested, 281
not given opportunity to defend himself before the Convention, 282–3
appears before Revolutionary Tribunal, 284–6
tries to calm Desmoulins, 286
execution, 287
R defames in speech, 291
brief references, 156, 212, 217, 228, 247, 254, 289, 319, 324
Dantonists, 281–2, 284, 286, 287, 308
Dauchez, Jean Baptiste, 8
Dauphin see Capet, Louis
David, Jacques-Louis, 81–2, 206, 208, 240, 249, 290,
Death of Socrates, 82
The Oath of the Horatii, 82
Declaration of Rights, 6, 91–2, 93, 107, 111, 192, 244, 246, 323
Défenseur de la Constitution, Le (The Defender of the Constitution), 181–3, 191
Deflue, Lieutenant, 84
Delacroix, Jean, 236
Delaroche, M., 25
Delmas, Jean, 236
democracy, 41, 107, 211, 246 see also representation; suffrage
Deshorties, Anais, 47, 48–9, 162
Desmoulins, Camille
at Louis-le-Grand, 28, 30
addresses Paris crowd, 83
and significance of colours of patriotic
cockade, 86
comments on Marat, 95
R’s complaint about report by, 118–19
response to R’s complaint, 119–20
marriage, 119
mocks Festival of Federation, 123
defends himself against Malouet, 124
R intervenes in defence of, 124
reminded by R to advertise his speech, 140
declares willingness to save R’s life, 150
elected to Convention, 206
at official opening of Convention, 208
response to verdict on Girondins, 262
sets off on new course of activism, 269–71
R loses temper with, 271
Danton intervenes between R and, 271–2
expelled from Jacobins, 273
R supports expulsion of, 273–4
R refuses to see, 280
arrested, 281
R’s notes on, 281–2
R not willing to intervene to save, 283
appears before
Revolutionary Tribunal, 284
sentenced to death, 286
writes to wife, 286
journey to the guillotine, 287
brief references, 31, 114, 136, 137, 194, 221, 276, 314
Desmoulins (née Horace), Lucile, 119, 140, 194–5, 271, 280, 283, 286
Dickens, Charles: A Tale of
Two Cities, 50
Dominican order, 114
Douai, 17
Dubois de Fosseux, 43, 45, 66, 68, 115
Duchesne, James, 2
Dumerbion, General, 252
Dumont, Étienne, 128, 129, 130, 132
Dumouriez, General, 236, 238, 239, 243, 268, 276, 282
Duplay, Éléonore, 177, 323
Duplay, Élisabeth, 177, 230, 274
Duplay, Mme, 207, 208, 217, 323
Duplay, Maurice, 155, 163, 176, 204, 218, 300
Dupond, M., 50–1, 96
Dutch Republic see Holland/Dutch Republic

East India Company, 272–3, 284

Échevinage (Magistrates’ Court), Arras, 36, 37

Écossais, Paris, 320

Edgeworth de Firmont, abbé

Henry Essex, 229

Élisabeth, Mme (king’s sister), 144, 145, 151, 179, 189–90, 292
Emery, Louis, 300
England, 117, 233, 234 see also Britain/the British
Estates General, 5, 58, 59, 60, 61, 65, 68, 71–81, 108, 109, 313
Estates of Artois, 60–1, 62, 63–5
elections to, 65–8
Eure-et-Loir, department of, 206
Executive veto, 104, 105, 106
Fabre d’Églantine, 262–4, 265, 272–3, 281, 282, 284, 285
Fauchet, Claude, 139
Ferrières, Marquis de, 72, 208
Festival of Federation, 121–3, 151–2, 169, 289
Feuillants Club, 150, 154, 161, 164, 166, 204
Fillion, Didier, 300
Finance Commission, 278, 316
Flanders regiment, 93
Flesselles de, 85, 89
Fleurus, battle of, 307–8, 309, 317
Forest of Bondy, 135, 151
Fouché, Joseph, 299, 301–2, 304, 309, 310, 314, 317, 318
Foulon, Joseph François, 85
Fouquier-Tinville, Antoine, 235, 294, 297, 305, 307
Fox, the (Hôtelerie du Renard), Versailles, 72
Francis II, Holy Roman Emperor, 179
Franklin, Benjamin, 38, 91, 95, 101, 178
Fréron, Louis Marie Stanislas, 30–1, 176
Furet, François, 4

General Maximum Law, 265
George III, King of England, 174
Gérard, François, 176
Gerle, Dom, 304
Gironde, department of, 206, 209

Girondins

Brissot and friends become known as, 208–9

and disputes in the Convention, 211, 213–14

and violence, 217

demand referendum on king’s fate, 225

Brissot is unofficial leader
of, 226
try to save king after passing of sentence, 228
violence in Paris against, 235
excluded from Committee of Public Safety, 236–7
R attempts to implicate in treachery of Dumouriez, 238, 239
views on private property,
commitment to the people doubted by R, 239
attack Marat, 239–40
attack on, 241–4
leaders arrested, 243
envisage republic secured on free market economics, 245
Caen as centre for, 247
and Charlotte Corday, 247–8, 250
mission to report on
extent of support for, 251
trial of, 260–2
guillotined, 262
and East India Company, 272–3
brief references, 244, 246, 248, 249, 252, 265, 267, 279, 281, 282
Gobel, Jean-Baptiste-Joseph, Archbishop of Paris, 267
Goddess of Reason, 267
Goethe, 203, 208
Gossec, 131, 293

*La prise de la Bastille* (The Fall of the Bastille), 151

Gouvon, Geneviève, 2

Gouges, Olympe de, 215

Gravier, Claude, 265

Grenoble, 58

Gresset, Jean-Baptiste, 44–5

*Ver-Vert*, 44

Guadet, Marguérite-Élie, 239, 240, 252

Guillotin, Dr Joseph-Ignace,
guillotine, 134, 201–2, 295–6, 303, 323
first public use of, 201
Louis XVI’s execution, 229–30
Marie-Antoinette’s execution, 259–60
R’s execution, 324–5
other executions, 1–2, 201, 250, 258, 262, 287, 297, 305–6, 307
Guyton, Louis, 236
Halifax Gibbet, 134
Hanriot, François, 243, 279, 309, 319, 320, 322, 323, 324
Harduin, Alexandre, 43
Hébert, Jacques-René, 257, 259, 266, 267–8, 269, 273, 276, 277–8, 279, 308
Hébertistes, 277–8, 279
Helvétius, 218
Henry, Jean Baptiste, 2
Henry IV, King of France,
Hérault de Séchelles, 254
Hérivaux, abbé, 28, 29
Herman, Martial Joseph Armand, 286, 288, 300, 309
Hesdin lodge, 49
Holland/Dutch Republic, 234, 236
Horace, Lucile see Desmoulins (née Horace), Lucile
Hôtel des Menus-Plaisirs,
Versailles, 73 see also Salle des Menus-Plaisirs
Hôtel de Ville, Paris
de Flesselles murdered on steps of, 85
royal family go to, 86, 87, 88
mob of women set off from, 93
new municipal committee (Commune de Paris) established, 109
flag of martial law flown
from, 153
petition destroyed by fire
in, 153
Mandat murdered on steps
of, 195, 285
black flag flown from,
199
guillotine positioned
outside, 201
Marat rings tocsin at, 243
tocsin rung after R’s
arrest, 319
R and companions at,
brief references, 143, 178, 282

Hôtel de Ville, Sens, 34
Hôtellerie, du Renard (the Fox), Versailles, 72

Insurrectionary Commune formed with intention of taking over municipal government, 194
and murder of Mandat, 195
R elected to, 198
composition, 198
and September massacres, 200, 213, 214
Pétion wants to disband, 204
complaints about, 216
chooses members of Revolutionary tribunal, 235
Girondins attack, 241
clashes with, 254
and Lyon, 256
responsible for guarding royal family, 259
Hébert prominent in, 266
Jacobins against, 269
supports continuation of war government, 308
rises in support of R, 319–20, 321
brief references, 267, 277, 304, 305, 313
Invalides, Paris, 84
Isnard, Maximin, 241, 242
Jacobin Club
origins and statutes, 114
acquires central role in revolutionary politics, 114–15
proposal to cast bust of Mirabeau in bronze, 131
R addresses on freedom of the press, 137–8
R addresses on exclusion of non-tax-paying citizens from National
Guard, 140
supports Châteauvieux soldiers, 141, 142
R explains decision to give up post of judge to, 146
Mme Roland attends, 148
R addresses about royal flight, 149–50
schism in, 150, 161
and petition for deposition of the king, 152–3
R addresses after Champ
de Mars massacre, 154, 186
disturbance by National Guards at, 154
and R’s return to Paris, 165
R discusses religion with, 165
divisions among, 165–6, 167, 173, 179, 180
R sets out his vision to, 167–70, 171
discussion about new
rifle, 174
R fails to sway against war, 174
R’s profession of faith made to, 175–6
celebrates return of Châteauvieux soldiers, 177
proposal for new patriot army chosen by, 185
Lafayette hostile to, 187, 191
Brunswick’s manifesto
read to, 193–4
R addresses after fall of Tuileries, 196–7
and Paris representatives, 204
Brissot and friends expelled from, 213
R’s speech in self defence is celebrated by, 217
destruction of busts of Mirabeau and Helvétius, 218
memorandum warning
against confounding R and Marat, 219
hears R’s speech against referendum, 226
and execution of king, 228
strife between Girondins and, 228, 239–40, 241–2, 244, 246
R addresses on subject of traitors and possible death, 237–8
and need for war
government, 247
response to death of Marat, 249
more factional strife, 265–6
and R’s speech opposing atheism, 266–7
R intervenes to prevent exclusion of Danton from, 268–9
quarrel between R and Camille Desmoulins at, 271–2
Fabre d’Églantine expelled from, 272, 273
Camille Desmoulins expelled from, 273
Collot’s views about, 277
R insists on discussing conspiracy with, 288
and R’s survival of assassination attempts, 294–5
R denounces Fouché at, 302, 309
R addresses on patriotism and fight against internal enemies, 308–9
R criticises fraternal banquets to, 309–10
supports R, 317, 320
brief references, 129, 156, 182, 188, 205, 214, 235, 248, 250, 252, 257, 261, 275, 276, 285, 289, 300, 304, 313
Jansenists, 20
Jefferson, Thomas, 91
Jemmappes, battle of, 233
Jesuits, 20–1, 22, 25, 26, 27, 44, 45

*Journal de Louis XVI et de son peuple*, 135

Jura, the, 256

La Force, Paris, 199, 200, 320
La Salpêtrière, Paris, 199
Labille-Guyard, Mme, 131,
156
Lafayette, General welcomes king to Paris, 87
commander of National Guard, 87
background, 87–8
adapts uniforms of National Guard, 88
makes changes to National Guard, 90
struggles to keep order in Paris, 93
arrives in Versailles and meets king, 94
clashes with Danton over organisation of Paris, 109
Cordeliers’ attitude to, 110
at Festival of Federation, 122–3
and flight of royal family, 144, 146, 150
at second anniversary of fall of Bastille, 151
and Champ de Mars massacre, 153, 186 and votes in municipal elections, 164
R’s distrust of, 174
R criticised for attacking, 180
faces problems at front line, 187
blames France’s troubles on Jacobin Club, 187
returns to Paris after invasion of Tuileries,
visits the king, 191
flees the country, 198
and first public use of
guillotine, 201
brief references, 91, 127,
143, 178, 182, 193,
236, 276, 282
Lally-Tollendal, 90
Lamballe, Princesse de, 199
Lameth brothers, 282
Lamoignon, Chrétien François de, 57, 59, 60
see also Lamoignon Edicts
Lamoignon Edicts, 57–9, 68, 183
Lanthenas, François-Xavier, 139
Lantillette, 69
Launay, Governor de, 84, 85, 89
Law of Frimaire, 269, 277
Law of Prairial, 7, 297, 298, 299, 301, 303, 312
Law of Suspects, 258, 269,
Le Blond de Neuvéglise, 26
Le Gay, 43, 49
Lebas (née Duplay), Élisabeth, 320
Lebas, Philippe, 274, 319, 320, 322, 323
Legislative Assembly
R’s view of, 164
approves ultimatum to
Leopold II, 167
R advises vigilance for, 169
R proposes new hall for, 169–70
receives returning Châteauvieux soldiers, 177–8
and king’s veto, 184, 187
abolishes king’s personal bodyguard, 185
and actions of mob, 188–9, 190
king seeks sanctuary with, 195
continues to meet after
storming of Tuileries, 198
decree about election to Convention, 203
and Saint-Just, 220
and East India Company, 272
brief references, 165, 168, 171, 180, 193, 208
Leopold II, Holy Roman Emperor, 124, 167, 175
Lettres à ses commettans (Letters of Maximilien
Robespierre, member of the National Convention of France, to his Constituents), 209

Levy of Three Hundred Thousand, 237

Lewes, G.H., 37

Lille, 162, 274

Lillers, 61

Lindet, Jean, 236, 254

Lohier, 300

Loizelier, Frances, 2

London, 153, 285
Louis XIII, King of France, 229
Louis XIV, King of France, 25, 70, 95, 229
Louis XV, King of France, 20, 97, 132, 220, 229
Louis XVI, King of France
coronation, 28–9
visit to Louis-le-Grand, 28, 29–30
and R’s hopes for reform, 50–1
and parlements, 56
and Lamoignon, 57
and convening of Estates General, 59, 60, 65
at meeting of Estates General, 71
at official opening of Estates General, 73
and declaration of National Assembly, 81
and Royal Session, 81, 82
response to events in Paris, 85–6
visits Paris, 86, 87, 88
returns to Versailles, 88
Lafayette explains situation to, 94
returns to Paris, 94–5
and constitutional debates, 104, 105, 106, 107
and preparation for war, 117
effectively a prisoner in the Tuileries, 118
fraught relations with National Assembly,
118
and Festival of Federation, 121, 122, 123
blame deflected from ministers of, 124–5
and Mirabeau, 125, 126, 127, 129, 218
and National Guard, 141
hopes to leave Paris, 142–3
addresses National Assembly after
prevention of departure, 143
flight, 143–6
list of complaints against Assembly and constitution, 146
effect of flight on R, 149, 150–1
Cordeliers Club demands referendum on fate of, 152
views of Assembly deputies about, 152
petition calling for deposition of, 152
petition demanding trial of, 153
formally accepts constitution, 155
and Feuillants, 164–5
dismisses ministers and appoints Brissot’s associates, 171
and religious matters, 184
removal of personal bodyguard, 185
dismisses ministers after receiving Roland’s letter, 187
and mob’s invasion of the Tuileries, 189, 190
and formal abolition of monarchy, 209
Napoleon’s comment on, 213
fate discussed in Convention, 219–23
questioned in the Convention, 224
lawyers present case for, 224
Saint-Just’s response to lawyers’ case, 224–5
Girondins demand referendum on fate of, 225
found guilty, 226
voting on sentence of, 226–7
R works to ensure execution of, 227
condemned, 228
Convension votes against reprieve of, 228 and Malesherbes, 228–9 last night of, 229 death, 229–30 ring returned to Marie-Antoinette, 230 news of execution spreads across Europe, 233 brief references, 27, 74, 83, 260, 308 Louis Capet (Dauphin) see Capet, Louis
Louis, Antoine, 134, 202
Louis-le-Grand, Paris, 20, 21, 23, 24–31, 32, 44, 45, 80, 119, 122, 192
Louvet, Jean Baptiste, 180, 213–14, 217, 247, 326
Louvre palace, Paris, 118
Luxembourg gaol, Paris, 281, 286, 320
Lyon, 246, 251, 254, 256, 258, 277, 292, 301, 302
Magistrates’ Court
(Échevinage), Arras, 36, 37
Maillard, Stanislas, 93, 94
Maison Robespierre, Arras, 8, 33
Malesherbes, M. de, 228–9
Malouet, Pierre-Victor, 76, 78, 123, 124
Mandat, 195, 285
Manège, the, Paris as meeting place of National Assembly, 97, 114, 118, 127,
as meeting place of Legislative Assembly, 177–8, 188–9, 198
Châteauvieux soldiers and the mob enter, 177–8
mob enters, 188–9
royal family take sanctuary in, 195
as meeting place of Convention, 208, 214, 226, 240
busts smashed in, 218
Convention moves from, 242
Manosque, 251, 252
Marais Quarter, Paris, 57, 60, 97, 128, 199, 280 see also Saintonge, rue
Marat, Jean Paul
Buissart seeks guidance from, 37
writes pamphlets including *Offrande à la patrie* (Offering to the Fatherland), 95
encourages insurrection, 95
arrested and imprisoned, 95–6
continues to try to inflame Paris mob, 96
denounces National Assembly, 123
response to troops crossing border, 123–4
draws attention to Mirabeau’s money,
supports R’s position on conscription to National Guard, 140
warns against allowing departure of royal family, 143
suspicious of National Assembly, 152
elected to National Convention, 204, 206
at official opening of Convention, 208
meeting with R, 212
makes speech addressing
charge of tyranny
against R and other
Paris representatives,
212–13
prophesies anarchy and
dictatorship, 213
R accused of associating
with, 214
R denies playing part in
election of, 215–16
proved right in his view of
Mirabeau, 219
blamed by Girondins for inciting violence, 235
fighting spirit in face of enmity, 238
arrested, 239–40
Convention votes for indictment of, 240
acquitted by Revolutionary Tribunal and returns to Convention, 240–1
rings tocsin during
insurrection, 243
Girondin newspaper attack on, 247
assassination, 248
R’s response to death of, 248–9, 249–50
funeral, 249
brief references, 137, 217, 226, 245, 247, 269, 270, 285
see also Ami du Peuple, L’
Marbœuf, Henrietta Frances
Marie-Antoinette, Queen welcomed to Louis-le-Grand, 29
at Versailles, 49, 71, 73, 81, 93
arrives in Paris, 95
complains about insults and threats at the Tuileries, 118
and Mirabeau, 127, 129
longs to leave Paris, 142–3
plans escape, 143
royal flight, 144–6
returns to Paris, 151
and death of Princesse de Lamballe, 203
last parting from her husband, 229
and death of husband, 230
transferred to Conciergerie pending trial, 254
trial, 259
guillotined, 259–60
brief references, 124, 167, 315
Marly-la-Ville, 38
Marseillaise, the, 193, 262
Marseille, 73, 150, 193, 246, 251, 253, 256
insurgents from, 251, 252
Maury, abbé, 134, 135, 305
Mémoires authentiques de Maximilien,
Robespierre, 23
Mercer, Colonel George, 38
Mercure de France, 38, 125
Metz, 141
Academy of, 41, 42
Michelet, Jules, 95, 246
Midi, the, 186, 253, 279
Miles, William Augustus, 170–1
Mirabeau, Comte de
at meeting of Estates General, 72–3
reputation, 72–3
R’s verdict on, 77
opinion of Sieyès, 79
at Royal Session, 82
R changes opinion about, 82
draws up petition to king, 83
speech on threat of foreign invasion at National Assembly, 86
visits Bastille after its fall, 88
presents projected Declaration of Rights to National Assembly,
dismayed by National Assembly’s destructive decrees, 92 and constitutional debates, 104–5, 110, 117 and issue of priestly celibacy, 113 advises the king, 125, 126, 127 R’s attitude to, 125–6 illness, 126–7, 128, 129 elected president of
National Assembly, 128
deterioration in health, 129
visitors to, 129–30
death, 130
funeral, 130–1
impact of death on R’s future, 131–2
Pujoulx writes play about death of, 139
posthumous reputation ruined 218–19
remains removed from Panthéon, 249
brief references, 96, 136, 142, 143, 151, 164, 197, 221, 248, 276, 282, 285
Molière, 20
Momoro, Antoine François, 267
Momoro, Mme, 267
monarchy, 41–2, 55–6, 57, 58, 79, 104, 105, 106–7, 117, 118, 151, 152, 155,
182, 184, 195, 197, 198, 200, 201, 209 see also Louis XVI, King of France
Mont-Rouge, mayor of, 299–300
Montesquieu, Charles de Secondat, Baron de, 61, 136, 223
De l’esprit des loix (The Spirit of the Laws), 41
Montmorin, Comte de, 165
Montmédy, 144, 145
Moore, John Dr, 213, 214, 217
Morisson, Charles, 219–20, 221
Moulins, 261
Mounier, Jean-Joseph, 78
Mountain, the, 208, 211, 213, 226, 235, 302, 303
Municipal Police Department, 140
Municipality of Paris, 143
Musée Carnavalet, 69
Nancy, 141–2, 144, 169, 177
Nantes, 277
Napoleon Bonaparte, 213
Narbonne, Comte de, 165
National Assembly
  Third Estate renames itself as, 81
  Paris crowd demands, 82
  king orders Nobility and Clergy to join Third Estate in, 82
  in Versailles, 83, 85, 86, 90–3, 94, 96–7
prepares draft of Declaration of Rights, 91–2
decrees to destroy offending features of Old Regime, 92
delegation of women demand food in, 94
discusses form in which decisions should be published, 96
closes sessions at Versailles and
reconvenes in Paris, 97
R’s payment as deputy of, 101
R’s serious and principled approach to business of, 102
R writes to Buissart about, 103
constitutional debates, 104–14
and war, 117, 124–5
king’s relationship with,
deputies at Festival of Federation, 121, 122
king swears to uphold decrees of, 123
and Marat, 123, 124
and Camille Desmoulins, 124
problems associated with meeting at the Manège, 127, 170
Mirabeau elected president of, 128
discussions concerning Mirabeau after his death, 130

discusses new penal code, 133–6

members prohibited from becoming ministers of the king, 136

members ineligible for election to new legislature, 136

discussions about National Guard, 140–
praises Bouillé for repression of Châteauvieux soldiers, 141
addressed by king about his intention to leave Paris, 143
and king’s flight, 146–7, 149–50
delegation sent to celebration of second anniversary of fall of
Bastille, 151
hears petition demanding referendum on fate of king, 151–2
discussions about fate of king, 152
last day of, 155
R points out shortcomings of, 163, 168, 169
brief references, 79, 87, 115, 126, 129, 137, 156, 162, 193, 202, 225, 227, 313
National Convention elections for, 203–4
delegates elected to, 206
official opening, 208
factions in, 208–9, 213
accusations against R, and
defence, 211–17
discusses fate of king,
219–23, 224–6
king found guilty by, 226
votes on king’s sentence,
226–8
votes against reprieve for
king, 228
promises to help all peoples fighting for liberty, 233
declares war on England and Dutch Republic, 234
Revolutionary Tribunal revived by, 234–5
creates Committee of Public Safety, 236–7
Levy of Three Hundred Thousand, 237
R accuses Girondins of conspiracy, 238–9
and accusations against Marat, 239–41
expulsion of Girondins from, 241–3, 265
begins to discuss new republican constitution, 244
discusses declaration of rights, 244–6
new constitution drafted by, 246
suspension of constitution and continuation of provisional revolutionary government, 246–7, 254
depuities sent out on mission, 250–2
declares the Terror, 257–8 and trial of Girondins, 260, 261
hears report on new calendar, 262–3
R presents bill on education, 264–5 and price regulation, 265
Archbishop of Paris renounces his faith before, 267
decree closing churches of Paris, 267
passes Law of 14 Frimaire, 269
forces East India Company into liquidation, 273
R sets out his revolutionary creed to, 274–6

report against Dantonists read in, 281–2
decree preventing Dantonists from finishing their defence, 286

addressed by R on God, 290–1

approves decree establishing worship
of Supreme Being, 291
approves festivals, 291–2
Mme Royale makes request to, 293
addressed by R after assassination attempts, 294
R elected as president of, 295
passes Law of 22 Prairial, 297
fear felt by deputies, 299
R’s warnings in, 302–3
R ceases to be president of, 306
R’s last speech to, 311–16
turns against R, 318–19
R and companions declared outlaws by, 320
sends soldiers to capture
R and companions, 321
brief references, 218, 277, 278, 279, 289, 305,
National Guard

Lafayette becomes commander of, 87

uniforms, 88

problems keeping order in Paris, 89, 93

origin and purpose, 89–90

imitated outside Paris, 89, 90

discussed in National Assembly, 90, 140–1, 142
in Versailles, 94
and exclusion of non-tax-paying citizens, 107, 140
Danton a captain in Cordeliers district, 109
and Festivals of Federation, 121
at Festival of Federation in Paris, 123
and royal flight, 145, 146
and Champ de Mars
massacre, 153, 154, 186
in Bapaume, 156, 157
in Arras, 161, 162
question of arming, 166, 168
and R’s suggestion for new Festival of Federation, 169
enter Legislative Assembly with Châteauvieux soldiers, 177
and festival of Châteauvieux, 179
and proposal for new federalist army, 185
on the front line, 187
and events of 20 June 1792, 188, 189, 190
battalions supporting king, 195
and storming of the Tuileries, 196
at first execution with guillotine, 201
at battle of Valmy, 203
and arrest of Girondin leaders, 243
and mission of Augustin de Robespierre and Ricord, 251–2
in Lyon, 256
changes to, 279
brief references, 127, 236
Necker, Jacques, 59–60, 65, 72, 73, 75, 78, 81, 82, 83, 85, 86, 171–2, 308, 309
Neerwinden, battle of, 236
Nevers, 261, 292, 301
Nice, 251, 252
Nîmes, 246
Archbishop of, 80, 111
Nivre, 301
Nobility, 29, 56, 60, 65, 68, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 78, 79, 82
Notre-Dame, Cathedral of, Paris, 25, 199, 267
Notre-Dame, Church of,
Versailles, 71
Nootka Sound, 116, 117

Orateur du peuple, L’, 139
Osselin, Charles Nicolas, 261

Pacific, 116–17
Paine, Thomas, 281
The Rights of Man, 281

Palais de Justice, Paris, 240, 284
Palais-Royal gardens, Paris,
83, 178, 270
Palloy, Pierre-François, 89, 200
Panthéon (formerly Church of Sainte-Geneviève),
Paris, 130–1, 218, 248, 249 see also Sainte-
Geneviève, Church of Paris
R’s schooldays in, 20, 24–31
electoral procedure for Estates General, 65,
78

deputies sent to Versailles, 78

support for National Assembly in, 82

insurrection and storming of Bastille, 83–5

royal family’s visit to, 86–8

Assembly deputies visit Bastille, 88–9

food shortages, 93–4

women’s march to
Versailles, 93–4
royal family returns to, 95
National Assembly moves to, 97
municipal power in, 109–10
Festival of Federation celebrated in, 121–3
everyday life in, 139
tensions and violent incidents, 139–40
royal flight from, 143–6
celebrations for second
anniversary of fall of Bastille, 151
Champ de Mars massacre, 153–4
Pétion becomes mayor of, 164
freed Châteauvieux
soldiers return to, 177–8
insurrection, and invasion of Tuileries, 188–90
electoral assemblies go into permanent
session, 193
insurrection, and storming of Tuileries, 194–7
September massacres, 199–200
representatives for sections and suburbs chosen, 204
representatives in Convention, 206, 211, 226, 228
opposition to Girondins, 235, 241, 242–3
further insurrection, 257
popular assemblies
become answerable to
Convention, 269
effect of new police laws
on, 288–9
Festival of Supreme
Being celebrated, 295–6
fraternal banquets, 309
see also Commune de
Paris; Insurrectionary
Commune; Parlement
de Paris
Paris, Archbishop of, 21
Parlement of Besançon, 73
Parlement of Bordeaux, 56
Parlement of Paris, 55, 57, 58, 60, 271
*Patriote français*, 147, 218, 245
Pavillon de Flore, 310
Payan, Claude, 279, 288, 300, 305, 309
Peel, Robert, 1, 2
Pelletier, Nicholas Jacques,
Père Duchesne, Le, 257, 278
Pétion, Jérôme
walks with R through Tuileries garden, 117–18
discusses response to royal flight, 147, 148–9
takes charge of royal party on return journey, 151
negotiates with Cordeliers Club, 152
acclaimed by crowd, 155–6
becomes mayor of Paris, 164
R dines with on return to Paris, 164
and Festival of Federation, 169
R falls out with, 172
and festival in honour of Châteauvieux soldiers, 178, 179
and insurrection of 20
June 1792, 188, 190
popularity with crowd, 193
deterioration in relationship with R, 204–6, 208, 238, 239, 240
in Caen, 247
escapes arrest, 261
body found, 261
brief references, 132, 154, 198
Pitt, Prime Minister, 117,
233, 234, 239, 273, 314
Place de Carrousel, Paris, 202
Place de Grève, Paris, 132, 201
Place de la Révolution, Paris, 202, 230, 262, 287, 323
Place Vendôme section (later Section des Piques), Paris, 194, 198
see also Section des Piques
Plain, the, 209
Plaisant, Mary Angelica, 2
Poitou, 81
Police Bureau, 299, 301, 305, 306–7
Pope, Alexander: *The Rape of the Lock*, 44
Premonstratensians of Dommartin, 17
Prieur, 254
Provence, Comte de, 86
Proyart, abbé, 25–6, 26–7, 29, 31
Prudhon, Pierre Paul, 176
Prussia/Prussians, 149, 179, 203, 208
Pujoulx, Jean-Baptiste: *La mort de Mirabeau*, 139
Pye, Henry James, 170
Quarterly Review, *The*, 2–3
Racine, 57
Raigecourt, Marquise de, 179, 189
Rapporteurs, rue des, Arras,
Reign of Terror see Terror, the
Reims, 28, 29, 144
Renaudin, Léopold, 256
Renault, Cécile, 293–4, 305, 306
Rennes, 58
Representation, 63, 64–5, 108–9, 225 see also Democracy; Suffrage
Republic
Brissot emerges as
advocate for, 171, 182
Brissot’s circle draws up plans for, 186
from fall of monarchy to announcement of, 198–209
announcement of, 209
R’s views on, 209–10
history of (from announcement to death of R), 211–325
Républicain, Le (The Republican), 182
Resolution, 116

Revolutionary Army, 237, 257–8, 279, 307

Revolutionary Tribunal establishment of, 201, 202
revival of, 234–5
members of, 235
and creation of Committee of Public Safety, 236
Marat acquitted by, 240
expanded, 258
under control of
Committee of Public Safety and Committee of General Security, 258–9

Marie-Antoinette appears before, 259

Girondins appear before, 260, 261–2
called into question by Camille Desmoulins, 270

Hébertistes appear before, 277–8
Danton to be tried by, 282
Dantonists appear before, 284–6
Danton asks pardon for his part in establishing, 287
overseen by Commission for Civil Administration and Police, 288
and Law of 22 Prairial, 297, 312
Convention deputies
afraid of being sent before, 299
R’s appointments to, 300
R and companions appear before, 323
number of victims, 2
brief references, 7, 237, 265, 295, 302, 310, 313, 326
Révolutions de France et de Brabant (Revolutions of France and Brabant), 95, 123, 140
Ricord, Jean François, 251–2
Riom, 76
Robespierre, Augustin de (R’s brother)
birth, 17
childhood, 18
takes up his brother’s scholarship, 31, 32
letters to R, 113, 115–16, 122
and R’s return to Arras,
156

elected to Convention, 206–7

at official opening of Convention, 208

on mission in the south, 251–2, 258

another visit to the provinces, 289

arrested, 319

imprisoned and released, 320

falls from ledge of Hôtel
de Ville, 321–2
before Revolutionary Tribunal, 323
on cart with brother, 324
Robespierre, Charlotte de
(R’s sister)
birth, 17
account of R’s childhood, 18, 19, 20, 25, 30, 31
completes education and returns to Arras, 32
account of R’s early adult life in Arras, 33, 35–6,
Augustin complains about hardships shared with, 122
writes about R’s domestic life with the Duplays, 155
and R’s return to Arras, 48, 156, 162
moves to Paris and lives with the Duplays, 207
lobbies R to rent house of his own, 207–8
and R’s illness, 217
and R’s return to Duplay household, 217–18
accompanies Augustin on journey south, 251–2
account of relationship between R and Fouché, 302
Robespierre, Henriette de (R’s sister), 17, 18, 19, 30, 32
Robespierre (née Carraut), Jacqueline Marguerite de
(R’s mother), 17–18
Robespierre, Maximilien de complexity of role in Revolution, 2–3, 5–8, 10–11
personality, 4–5, 30–1, 171
appearance, 4, 8–10, 289
attitudes to his memory in Arras, 8
as public speaker, 10
family background, 16–19
birth, 8, 15, 17
childhood and schooldays in Arras, 18–20
wins scholarship to Louis-le-Grand, 20
at Louis-le-Grand, 21, 24–31
influenced by Rousseau, 23–4, 119–20, 141, 173, 210
gives speech of welcome to the king at Louis-le-Grand, 29–30
returns to Arras, 32–3
daily routine, 33
visits Sens, 34
visits Carvins, 34–5
as lawyer, 35–40, 50–1
wins election to Academy of Arras, 40
enters Academy of Metz competition with essay on bad blood, 41–2
and elections at Academy of Arras, 43
enters Academy of
Amiens competition, 43–5
writes poetry, 45–6
relationships with women in Arras, 46–9
and Anais Deshorties, 47–9, 162
member of the Rosati, 49–50
challenges Lamoignon Edicts, 58–9
and organisation of Estates General, 60
writes pamphlet about Estates of Artois: *A la nation artésienne sur la nécessité de réformer les États d’Artois*, 60–1, 63–4 and election campaign, 61, 63–8

writes pamphlet entitled *Les ennemis de la patrie démasqués*, 67–8

becomes representative of
Third Estate, 68
prepares to go to
Versailles, 68–9
finds accommodation in
Versailles, 72
in procession for meeting
of Estates General, 72, 73
makes speech about
impasse between
Third Estate and the
other two orders, 74–5
dines with Necker, 75
Mme de Staël’s opinion of, 75
identifies with fellow delegates from Arras, 76
opinion of Malouet, 76, 123
interested in Target, 76–7
verdict on Mirabeau, 77
article in Arras newspaper about, 77
attends meetings of Breton Club, 77–8
denunciation of the clergy, 80
appears in David’s picture of swearing of Tennis Court Oath, 82
revises opinion of Mirabeau, 82
presents petition of protest to king, 83
and events in Paris, 83, 85, 86–7, 88
visits Bastille, 88–9
supports National Guards,
90 supports opening of letters to Comte d’Artois, 90 agrees need for extraordinary courts, 90–1 contribution to Assembly debates at Versailles, 92–3, 96–7 receives Paris women demanding food, 93–4 orders inquiry into food shortage, 94
eager to make something of himself and the Revolution, 97
finds lodgings in Paris, 97, 101
financial affairs, 101–2
principled behaviour, 102
and his alleged mistress, 102–3
writes to Buissart and enquires about Arras, 103–4
and the constitution, 104–
opposes plan to divide citizens into two groups, 107
objects to marc d’argent, 107
and taxation, 107–8
defends Paris districts, 109–10
views on the Church, 111–13
letters from his brother, 113, 115–16, 122
inundated with letters, 114
growing reputation, 114
becomes involved in
Jacobin Club, 114
suspicious of spies and
plots, 116, 125
wants Assembly to seek
peace, and opposes
king’s right to declare
war, 117
indignant with Camille
Desmoulins, 118–19
Desmoulins’ responds to
complaint of, 119–20
at wedding of Desmoulins, 119
beginning of friendship with Saint-Just, 120–1
at Festival of Federation, 122
dislikes Lafayette, 123
intervenes in defence of Desmoulins, 124
fears enemies of the Revolution, 125
no suspicions about
Mirabeau, 125
growing admiration for
Mirabeau, 126
demands vote about
Mirabeau, 130
impact of Mirabeau’s
death on, 131–2
and alleged links with
Damiens, 132, 133
views on death penalty,
134–6
and decree preventing
Assembly members
from becoming ministers of the king, 136 proposes that Assembly members should be ineligible for new legislature, 136–7 argues for freedom of speech and freedom of the press, 137–8 borrows text of a speech on freedom of the press, 138–9
views on National Guard, 140–1, 142
protests against treatment of Châteauvieux soldiers, 141–2
gives up post of judge on Versailles tribunal, 146
appointed Public Prosecutor in Paris, 146
and flight of royal family, 146–7, 149–51
attends second Festival of Federation, 151, 152
wants king put on trial, 152
negotiations with Cordeliers demanding referendum, 152
response to Champ de Mars massacre, 153–4
and National Guard disturbance at Jacobin Club, 154
moves in with the
Duplays, 155
popularity in Paris, 155–6
return visit to Arras, 156–7, 161–4
realises social power of religion, 162–4
returns to Paris, 164
dines with Pétion, 164
writes to Buissart about situation in Paris, 164–5
becomes president of Jacobin Club, 165
views and speeches relating to war, 165, 166–71, 173, 174, 175, 191–2
conflict with Brissot, 165–6, 167, 172, 173, 183, 187–8
suggests new Festival of Federation, 169
suspicious of king’s ministers, 171–2
political isolation, 172–4
resigns from office of
Public Prosecutor, 173
views on new rifle, 174
distrusts Lafayette, 174
affirms belief in God, 175–6
life with the Duplays, 176–7
relationship with Eléanore Duplay, 177
and festival in honour of Châteauviex soldiers, 178
and Pétion’s request to
repair divisions at Jacobin Club, 179
compared with Danton, 180, 183
blamed for disputes among Jacobins, 180
starts own journal, *La Défenseur de la Constitution*, 180–2
first issue of journal, 182–3
summarises his own contribution to the
Revolution, 183
and idea of patriot army, 185
theoretical discussion of military discipline, 185–6
denounces forthcoming protest in Paris, 187–8
temporarily reunited with Brissot’s faction against Lafayette, 191
changing views about the war, 191–2
addresses federal forces in his journal, 192–3
at third 14 July festival, 193
and insurrection, 193–4, 196–7
elected to Insurrectionary Commune, 198
and September massacres, 200, 201, 216
sent to the Temple, 200
tries to get Brissot and Roland arrested, 200–
demands establishment of Revolutionary Tribunal, 201
and elections to Convention, 203–4
deterioration in relationship with Pétion, 204–6, 208
chosen as first of Paris deputies to Convention, 206
and brother’s election to
Convention, 206–7
joined by siblings in Duplay house, 207–8
first meeting of Convention, 208
relaunches journal under title *Lettres à ses commettans*, 209
outlines his concerns in first issue of journal, 209–11
attacks on, 211–14
female supporters, 214–15
defends himself against attacks, 211, 215–16
illness, 217
and discovery of Mirabeau’s treachery, 218–19
and debate about the king’s fate, 219, 220–3
friendship with Saint-Just, 220, 223–4
speaks against referendum, 225–6
continuing conflict with Brissot, 226
votes against referendum, 226
and sentencing of king, 227, 228
and king’s execution, 230
and death of Danton’s wife, 184, 234
fears traitors, 237–8
continuing fight with Girondins, 238–43
and discussions about new
declaration of rights, 244–6
and Constitution of 1793, 246
supports continuation of provisional revolutionary government, 247
and death of Marat, 248–9, 249–50
and situation in the provinces, 252–3
emergence of differences
between Danton and, 253–4

elected to Committee of Public Safety, 254
drafts personal revolutionary catechism, 255–6

and repression at Lyon, 256

has reservations about Hébert, 257

and Marie-Antoinette’s trial and execution,
and trial of Girondins, 260, 261
and death of Brissot, 262
and new calendar, 263
ideas on education, 264–5
needs to restrain violence, 265
and list of essential comestibles, 265
difficulty in obtaining silk stockings, 265
speaks against atheism,
266–8 defends Danton at Jacobin Club, 268–9 and Desmoulins, 269, 270–2, 273–4 and Fabre d’Eglantine, 272 illness, 274, 276 calls Saint-Just back to Paris, 274 develops personal revolutionary creed in speech to Convention,
asks for vote of confidence in Committee of Personal Safety, 277
denounces Hébert and his faction, 277
and changes following fall of Hébertists, 278–9
and downfall of Danton and Dantonists, 280–4, 286
preoccupied with

274–6
punishment, 288
and promotion of Herman, 288
supports tightening of police laws, 288–9
affirms religious beliefs, 289–92
and death of Mme Elizabeth, 292
visits the Tower, 292–3
and assassination attempts on, 293–5
and first Festival of the
Supreme Being, 295, 296
and Law of 22 Prairial, 297–8
Carnot hostile to, 298–9
enemies of, 299–300
runs Police Bureau, 299–300
patronage, 300–1
and arrest of Tallien’s
mistress, 301
and Fouché, 301–2, 309
and Bourdon, 302
and Tallien, 301, 303 attempt to concoct scandal concerning, 303–4 distances himself from Convention and Committee of Public Safety, 304 prevents trial of Théot sect, 305 and growing number of executions, 305–6, 307 attempts to reorganise
Police Bureau, 306–7 wishes to see continuation of war government, 308 speeches to the Jacobins, 308–10 and Vilate’s list, 310 inability to compromise, 310–11 last speech to Convention, 311–16 Cambon denounces, 316 rereads speech at Jacobin
Club, 317
Saint-Just visits, 318
Convention turns against, 318–19
arrested, 319
supported by Commune, 319–20
arrested and released, 320
takes refuge in Hôtel de Ville, 320
soldiers burst in on, 321
bullet wound, 321, 322
taken to Committee of
Public Safety, 322
before Revolutionary Tribunal, 323
taken to guillotine, 323–5
Wordsworth learns of death of, 326–7
Robespierre, Maximilien de (R’s father), 17, 18, 19, 32
Robespierre, Maximilien de (R’s grandfather), 16–17, 19
Robespierre, Robert de
(fifteenth century), 16
Robespierre, Robert de
(sixteenth century), 16
Rœderer, Pierre-Louis, 42,
154, 188, 195, 201
Roland, Jean Marie, 148,
171, 172, 184, 187, 198,
200, 213, 214, 262, 308,
309
Roland, Mme Manon, 147–
8, 149, 154, 172, 186–7,
203, 212, 237, 243–4, 
262
Rosati, 43, 49–50
Confessions, 48
Émile, 21–3, 24, 271
La Nouvelle Héloïse, 48
Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire, 23
Social Contract, 95, 170, 210
Royal Session, 81, 82
Royale, Mme, 293
Russia, 233

Sade, Marquis de, 20, 73, 84
Saint-André, 254
Saint-Antoine district, Paris, 84, 89, 139, 140, 190
Saint-Cloud, 142, 143, 285
Saint-Denis, 254
Saint-Firmin, monastery of, Paris, 199
Saint-Florentin, rue, Paris,
Saint-Germain-des-Près, Abbey of, Paris, 199, 200, 244, 261
Saint-Honoré, rue, Paris, 10, 154, 155, 176, 189, 217, 230, 287, 295, 300, 305
Saint-Just, Louis Antoine Léon de
background, 120
author of Organt, 120
friendship with R, 120–1, 223–4
speech at Convention about the king, 220–1
views on Christianity, 223–4
responds to case presented by king’s lawyers, 224–5
explains views of Committee of Public Safety to Convention, 246–7
member of Committee of Public Safety, 254
missions outside Paris, 274
reads report against Dantonists to Convention, 281, 282
proposes new decree banning prisoners from pleading their case, 286
recommends revision and tightening of police laws, 288
recalled to Paris, 294
Carnot opposes, 298–9 supervises army in the north, 299 takes over Police Bureau, 307 brings news of victory at Fleurus, 307–8 agrees with R about continuation of war government, 308 tries to act as peacemaker in Convention and its committees, 310
and R’s last speech to Convention, 311, 314, 316
attends meeting of Committee of Public Safety, 317
agrees to submit draft of speech to Committee of Public Safety, 317
visits R, 318
does not submit draft of speech, 318
unable to make speech,
arrested, 319
after arrest, 320, 322, 323
taken before Revolutionary Tribunal and sentenced, 323
taken to guillotine, 324
brief references, 222, 265, 276, 301
Saint-Lazare, Abbey of, Paris, 84
Saint-Lazare prison, Paris,
320
Saint-Louis, Church of, Versailles, 71
Saint-Marcel, 139
Saint-Omer, 37, 38, 39, 61
Saint-Vaast, Abbey of, Arras, 15–16, 61, 68, 112, 115–16
Abbot, 20, 80
Sainte-Amaranthe family, 306, 307
Sainte-Geneviève, Church of (later Panthéon), Paris,
30, 130 see also Panthéon Saintes, Bishop of, 199 Saintonge, rue, Paris, 97, 101, 106, 150, 176 Salis-Samade regiment, 84 Salle des Menus-Plaisirs, Versailles, 73, 74, 78, 79, 80, 81, 86 Salle Épiscopale (Bishop’s Court), Arras, 36, 39, 58 Sanson, Charles Henri, 202 Sault, 252
Sauvage, John, 2
Secondat, Charles de, Baron de Montesquieu  see Montesquieu, Charles de Secondat, Baron de
Section des Piques (Pikes Section; formerly Place Vendôme Section), Paris, 198, 204, 279, 321
see also Place Vendôme Section
Sens, 34
September massacres, 199–
200, 201, 212, 213, 214, 216, 235, 260, 266, 326
Servan, Joseph, 171, 172, 185, 186, 198
Seven Years War, 56
Sévigné, Mme de, 57
Sidney, Algernon, 178
Sieyès, abbé, 43, 78–9, 80, 82, 92, 95, 105, 108–9, 111, 112, 154, 244, 290
Simon, Anthony, 259
Society of the Friends of the Constitution (later
Jacobin Club) see Jacobin Club

Sommerville, Marie, 38–9
Souberbielle, Dr, 177, 300
Spain, 117, 233, 234
Staël, Madame de, 72–3, 75
Staël-Holstein, Baron de, 75
Strasbourg, 201, 274
Stuart, Charles Edward, the Young Pretender, 17
suffrage, 107, 108, 203, 246
see also democracy; representation
Supreme Being, 7, 266–7, 268, 291, 292, 296, 314–15
Festival of, 292, 293, 295–6, 298, 300, 301, 310, 315, 317
Swiss Guard, 71, 83, 132, 195, 196, 213
Switzerland, 141

Talleyrand-Périgord, Charles Maurice, Bishop of Autun, 122, 129–30
Tallien, Jean Lambert, 299, 301, 302, 303, 304, 310, 314, 317, 318, 319
Target, Guy-Jean-Baptiste, 76–7, 81
Temple, Paris, 199, 200, 203, 209, 224, 228, 236, 254, 259, 326
Temple of Reason, 267
Tennis Court Oath, 81–2, 146, 188, 189
Terror, the, 1–2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 27, 231–325
declaration of, 257, 258
Théâtre Feydeau, Paris, 139
Théâtre Français section, Paris, 110
Théot, Catherine, 303, 304, 314, 319
Théot sect, 303–4, 305, 306, 319
Third Estate, 29, 56, 57, 60, 61, 62, 63, 65, 66, 67, 68, 105, 183
at Versailles, 71, 72, 73, 74–5, 76, 77, 78, 79–
81, 189
Thompson, J.M., 125
Tocqueville, Alexis de, 228
Toulon, 246, 256, 257, 258, 298
Toulouse, 246
Tour du Pin, Madame de la, 93
Tournai, 32
Treilhad, Jean-Baptiste, 236
Tuileries gardens, Paris 117–18, 143, 179, 185, 188, 189, 190, 195, 287, 295,
296, 310
Tuileries palace, Paris
royal family in, 95, 96, 118, 126, 129, 142–3, 179, 185, 189–90
mob enters, 189–90
Brunswick warns against attack on, 193
storming of, 195–7, 213, 326
Convention assembles at, 208
renovated as new home
for Convention, 218
Mirabeau’s letters discovered at, 218, 221
crowd enters Convention in, 242–3
Committee of Public Safety meets at, 254, 308
Saint-Just goes to, 317
Hanriot liberated from, 320
R taken to, 322
Couthon taken to, 322–3
brief references, 279, 304, 317, 324

University of Paris, 21, 25, 27, 30


Valazé, 262

Valence, 300

Valmy, 202
battle of, 203, 233
Varennes, 145–6, 151, 152, 155, 225
Vendée, the, 234, 237, 256, 258, 289, 301
Verdun, 199
Versailles, 33, 56, 59, 64, 66, 67, 68, 70–1, 88, 89, 132, 146
Estates General in, 71–81
National Assembly in, 81–2, 83, 85–6, 90–3, 94, 96–7, 133
women’s march and demands, 93–4, 95
royal family leave, 94–5
*Vieux Cordeliers, Le*, 269–70, 271, 272, 281
Vilate, Joachim, 295, 296, 310, 314
Villiers, Pierre, 101–2, 103, 106, 114
Vincennes prison, 88
Virolle, Mary Magdelen, 2
Vissery de Bois-Valé, M. de, 37, 38
Voltaire, 20, 44, 178, 266

Walpole, Horace, 209

War Ministry, 278

Washington, George, 88

Wordsworth, William, 326–7

The Prelude, 326–7

York, Duke of, 314

Young, Arthur, 61–2, 70–1
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