Present historic: Carlyle, Robespierre, and the French Revolution

Part two

By Ann Talbot
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The following is the second part of a two-part essay reviewing two books by Ruth Scurr on the French Revolution. Part one was posted Thursday, July 17.

The attempt to understand Robespierre and the French Revolution brings Scurr almost inevitably to Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881). His now profoundly unfashionable account of the revolution was first published in 1837 and has Robespierre at its centre. Scurr has provided readers with an accessible edition of some of the highlights of Carlyle’s *The French Revolution*, complete with a useful introduction. Carlyle’s work has gone out of favour in part because of a literary style that was extraordinary even by the standards of the time, but, more fundamentally, because he recognised in the French Revolution an inevitable and necessary process that was still influencing the course of political life in his own day.

Carlyle’s French Revolution was not, like Simon Schama’s, an accidental event that could have been avoided. Nor was it, like Robert Darnton’s, dissociated from the ideas of the Enlightenment. The influence of Rousseau on Robespierre, who was rumoured to sleep with a copy of the *Social Contract* under his pillow, cannot be doubted. He often referred to the philosopher in his speeches and Robespierre was the central figure in the most revolutionary phase of the struggle. With these two books, Scurr has begun to reassemble the pieces of a history that has been heavily deconstructed in recent years.

Scurr’s extracts from Carlyle provide the modern reader with a good entry point into his dense multi-volume work. He has suffered something of the same fate as Sir Walter Scott, whom he resembles in both his Tory radicalism and his elaborate, but intensely visual, literary style. There is a cinematic character in the way they both present history. They both owed a debt to Goethe and the German Pantheist tradition. Like Goethe, there is an element of the prophet about Carlyle. For Carlyle, history was a truly human “revelation” that owed nothing to God and reflected only the work of man.

History, for Carlyle, is not just about something that happened in the past. The French Revolution defined the modern period.

“It is the baptism-day of Democracy; sick Time has given it birth, the numbered months being run. The extreme-unction day of Feudalism!”

His use of the present tense is characteristic. He aims to make the reader experience what it was like to be there. The present tense conveys a sense of the rush of events and the uncertainties of the time. There was a definite purpose to this style. For Carlyle, the French Revolution remained part of a living struggle that would continue to influence the centuries to come.

“What a work, O Earth and Heavens, what a work! Battles and bloodshed, September Massacres, Bridges of Lodi, retreats of Moscow, Waterloo, Peterloos, Tenpound Franchises, Tarbarrels and Guillotines;—and from this present date, if one might prophesy, some two centuries of it still to fight! Two centuries; hardly less; before Democracy go through its due, most baleful, stages of Quackocracy; and a pestilential World be burnt up and have begun to grow green and young again.”

Reading his *French Revolution* is a dizzying experience. Words and images tumble one over another in rapid and headlong succession. He describes the procession of orders that preceded the opening of the Estates General scanning the crowds gathered in windows and other vantage points, cutting rapidly to the procession itself, and just as rapidly focusing in on the individuals who will be significant for his story until he come to Robespierre, then an unknown advocate from Arras.

“[W]ho of these Six Hundred may be the meanest? Shall we say, that anxious, slight, ineffectual-looking man, under thirty, in spectacles, his eyes (were the glasses off) troubled, careful; with upturned face, snuffing dimly the uncertain future-time; complexion of a multiplex atrabiliar colour, the final shade of which may be the pale sea-green”.

Robespierre had a pale complexion and wore green-tinted glasses to protect his weak eyes from the glare of the sun. Carlyle’s portrait of him as the “sea-green incorruptible” is an unflattering one. He has no natural sympathy for Robespierre, yet he holds the centre of the stage from this first appearance to his execution in July 1794 at the age of 35. He was an essential anti-hero for an historian who thought that history was driven by the actions of great men who embodied the spirit of their age. And Carlyle was objective enough to recognise that Robespierre expressed the spirit of his age.

Carlyle was not unaware of class, but he did not have a fully developed concept of the class struggle or its role in history. Despite these limitations, G.V. Plekhanov wrote approvingly of Carlyle’s *On Heroes
“Carlyle calls great men Beginners. This is a very apt description. A great man is precisely a Beginner because he sees farther than others do and his desires are stronger than in others. He solves scientific problems raised by the previous course of society’s intellectual development; he indicates the new social needs created by the previous development of social relations; he assumes the initiative in meeting those needs. He is a hero, not in the sense that he can halt or change the natural course of things, but in the sense that his activities are the conscious and free expression of that necessary and unconscious course. Therein lie all his significance, all his power. But it is a vast significance, and an awesome power.”


Plekhanov was not alone in his admiration for Carlyle. Engels reviewed his Past and Present (1843) for the Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher and described it as the only book published in England that year that was worth reading. Marx found him “frequently brilliant and always original”. He made careful notes on Carlyle’s Chartism in the 1840s and his reference to the nexus of “cash payment” in the Manifesto of the Communist Party is probably drawn from Carlyle.

Isaac Deutscher drew a comparison between Carlyle’s work and Trotsky’s History of the Russian Revolution. Like Trotsky, Carlyle is a master of the art of drawing crowd scenes and the movement of masses of people in the course of a revolutionary struggle. His description of the insurrection of 10 August 1792, when the Paris sans culottes seized the Tuileries, marking the beginning of the end for the monarchy, is sensitive to the subtle and sudden shifts in consciousness that characterise such a mass movement.

“Reader, fancy not, in thy languid way, that Insurrection is easy. Insurrection is difficult: each individual uncertain even of his next neighbour; totally uncertain of his distant neighbours, what strength is with him, what strength is against him; certain only that, in case of failure, his individual portion is the gallows.”

He imagines a flight across Paris “waving open all roofs and privacies”, noting the different responses.

“Fighters of this section draw out; hear that the next Section does not; and thereupon draw in. Sainte-Antoine, on this side the River, is uncertain of Saint-Marceau on that”.

He charts the uncertainties of the night until the morning when the royal family and courtiers, after beginning to believe that they are safe and the ringing of the tocsin has not summoned the revolutionaries, look out of the palace windows to see armed crowds advancing towards them.

“Unhappy Friends, the tocsin does yield, has yielded! Lo ye, how with the first sun-rays its Ocean-tide, of pikes and fusils, flows glittering from the far East,—immeasurable; born of the Night!”

He is acutely aware of the dynamics of the revolution and understands the external threat of invasion and the internal threat of counter-revolution that produced the September Massacres.

“Thirty thousand Aristocrats within our own walls; and but the merest quarter-tithe of them yet put in Prison. Nay there goes a word that even these will revolt.”

While for many of his contemporaries, as for many historians writing today, the September Massacres are an event that has a supra-historical character and serve to condemn the revolution, Carlyle was careful to set them within the historical context of previous massacres and atrocities carried out under the ancien regime.

“Kings themselves, not in desperation, but only in difficulty, have sat hatching, for year and day ... their Bartholomew Business”.

He weighs the questions that faced the revolutionaries in relation to the king.

“Keep him prisoner, he is a secret centre for the Disaffected, for endless plots, attempts and hopes of theirs. Banish him, he is an open centre for them; his royal war-standard, with what of divinity it has, unrolls itself, summoning the world. Put him to death? A cruel, questionable extremity that too: and yet the likeliest in these extreme circumstances, of insurrectionary men, whose own life and death lies staked: accordingly it is said, from the last step of the throne to the first of the scaffold there is a short distance.”

To those that would condemn the revolutionaries for lack of mercy he points out:

“Reader, thou hast never lived, for months, under the rustle of Prussian gallows-ropes”.

He recognises the political dynamics of the Terror and the relationship which developed between the sans culottes and the most determined of the Jacobins in the National Assembly—the Mountain—who established a system of repression against the enemies of the revolution. This was the Terror.

 “[T]ill treason be punished at home; they do not fly to the frontiers; but only fly hither and thither, demanding and denouncing. The Mountain must speak new fiat, and new fiats”.

The Terror does not emerge as the work of a few conspirators in Carlyle’s account of the French Revolution, but as the expression of a class that is fighting for its very existence.

“Twenty-five million, risen at length into Pythian mood, had stood up simultaneously to say, with a sound that goes through far lands
and times, that this untruth of an Existence had become
insupportable. Oh ye Hypocrisies and Speciosities, Royal mantles,
Cardinal plushcloaks, ye Credos, Formulas, Respectabilities,
fair-painted Sepulchres full of dead-men’s bones, behold, ye appear
to us to be altogether a Lie. Yet our Life is not a Lie, yet our Hunger
and Misery is not a Lie! Behold we lift up, one and all, our
Twenty-five million right hands; and take the Heavens, and the Earth
and also the Pit of Tophet to witness, that either ye shall be
abolished, or else we shall be abolished.”

It was Carlyle’s genius as a historian; that, without sympathising with
Robespierre, he could understand the social forces that lay behind this
slight, apparently insignificant, provincial lawyer and made him a great
revolutionary. He demonstrated the same ability to understand the
revolutionary role that Oliver Cromwell played in the English Revolution.
He produced an edition of Cromwell’s letters (1845) that Marx admired.

“To Thomas Carlyle belongs the credit of having taken the literary
field against the bourgeoisie at a time when its views, tastes and
ideas held the whole of official English literature totally in thrall, and
in a manner which is at times even revolutionary. For example, in his
history of the French Revolution, in his apology for Cromwell, in the
pamphlet on Chartism and in Past and Present.” [Karl Marx,
“Review: Latter-Day Pamphlets”, Neue Rheinische Zeitung
Politisch-ökonomische Revue No. 4, April, 1850, MECW, vol. 10,
pp. 301-10]

But 1848 was for Carlyle, as for other radical members of the
bourgeoisie, a turning point beyond which they had no stomach for
revolution. Carlyle lost his faith in democracy as revolution swept Europe
and the working class emerged for the first time as a distinct and
independent political force. Workers were to Carlyle “Vagrant Lackalls”.
Under these conditions, Carlyle feared that universal suffrage would mean
rule by the ignorant rather than the noble and the wise. The youth of the
“Students, young men of letters, advocates, newspaper writers, hot
inexperienced enthusiasts” who led the 1848 revolutions he now found
disconcerting in a way that it had not been when he wrote of the youth of
the Jacobins.

A tendency to idealise the medieval, which had always been evident in
Carlyle, as it was in other English radicals and even some Chartists, came
increasingly to dominate his thought after 1848. The genius of his early
works was lost in Carlyle’s later works, among which can be numbered
his life of Frederick the Great, the book which Hitler was reading during
his last days in the bunker. In these later works only the cult of the great
man remained. Despite Carlyle’s later evolution his early works are still
well worth reading for the insight they offer into the development of
radical thought in his own time, for their importance in the development
of historiography and because they offer an effective antidote to the
prevailing air of cynicism, derived from postmodernism, that has infected
the study of the French Revolution.

Concluded

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