13

ON THE PRINCIPLES OF REVOLUTIONARY GOVERNMENT

25 December 1793/5 Nivôse Year II

(Maximilien Robespierre)

A month after the passage of Billaut-Varenne's decree, Robespierre defended the necessity of the Terror. It was a response to the 'Indulgents' and to Camille Desmoulins and his newspaper Le Vieux Cordelier in particular, who had voiced criticism of the Terror.

Citizen people’s representatives,

Successes send weak souls to sleep; they spur strong souls on. Let us leave it to Europe and history to praise the miracles of Toulon, while we prepare new triumphs for liberty.

The Republic’s defenders adopt Caesar’s maxim: they believe nothing has been done so long as something remains to be done. We still face enough dangers to occupy all our zeal.

Vanquishing Englishmen and traitors is something easy enough for the valour of our republican soldiers; there is an enterprise that is no less important and more difficult: to confound through unswerving energy the eternal intrigues of all the enemies of our liberty, and ensure triumph for the principles on which public prosperity should be based.

Such are the first duties you have imposed on your Committee of Public Safety.

We are going to start by developing the principles and the necessity of revolutionary government; then we will show the cause that tends to paralyse it at birth.

The theory of revolutionary government is as new as the revolution which brought it into being. It should not be sought in the books of political writers, who did not foresee that revolution, nor in the laws of tyrants who, satisfied with abusing their power, are not much concerned with its legitimacy; and to the aristocracy that word is only a subject of terror or slanderous text; to tyrants, a mere scandal; to many other people, just an enigma; it needs to be explained to all, so that good citizens at least will rally to the principles of the public interest.

The function of government is to direct the moral and physical forces of the nation towards the goal of its appointing.

The goal of constitutional government is to preserve the Republic; that of revolutionary government is to found it.

Revolution is the war of liberty against its enemies: the constitution is the system of liberty victorious and at peace.

Revolutionary government needs extraordinary activity, precisely because it is at war. It is subject to less uniform and less rigorous rules, because the circumstances in which it exists are stormy and shifting, and above all because it is continually forced to deploy new resources rapidly, to confront new and pressing dangers.

Constitutional government is concerned principally with civil liberty, and revolutionary government, with public liberty. Under the constitutional system, it almost suffices to protect individuals against abuse of public power; under the revolutionary system, public power itself is obliged to defend itself against all the factions attacking it.

Revolutionary government owes good citizens full national protection; to enemies of the people it owes nothing but death.

These notions suffice to explain the origin and nature of the laws we call revolutionary. Those who call them arbitrary or tyrannical are stupid or perverse sophists seeking to confuse opposites: they want to apply the same system to peace and war, health and sickness; or rather they only want the resurrection of tyranny and the death of the homeland. If they invoke the literal execution of constitutional adages, it is just to violate them with impunity. They are cowardly assassins who, to cut the Republic’s throat in its cradle without risk, try hard to muzzle it with vague maxims from which they are practised at extirpating themselves.

The constitutional vessel was not built to stay in dry dock for ever; but should it have been launched in mid-storm, into unfavourable winds? That was wanted by the tyrants and slaves who had opposed its construction; but the French people has ordered you to wait for calmer conditions. Its unanimous wishes, instantly drowning the clamour from
the aristocracy and federalism, commanded you to deliver it first from all its enemies.

Temples to the gods are not meant to provide sanctuary for the sacrilegious who come to profane them; nor is the constitution supposed to protect the plots of tyrants who seek to destroy it.

If revolutionary government should be more active in its working and freer in its movements than ordinary government, does that make it less just and less legitimate? No. It is supported by the holiest of all laws: the salvation of the people; by the most indispensible of all entitlements: necessity.

It has its rules too, all drawn from justice and public order. It has nothing in common with anarchy or disorder; its purpose on the contrary is to suppress them, to introduce and consolidate the rule of law. It has nothing in common with arbitrary rule; it should not be guided by individual passions, but by the public interest.

It should come close to ordinary and general principles in all cases where they can be applied rigorously without compromising public liberty. The measure of its strength should be the boldness or perfidy of the conspirators. The more terrible it is towards the wicked, the more favourably it should treat the good. The more circumstances impose necessary rigour on it, the more it should abstain from measures that pointlessly interfere with liberty, and that jostle private interests without any public advantage.

It has to sail between two dangerous rocks, weakness and temerity, moderantism and excess, moderantism, which is to moderation as impotence is to chastity, and excess, which resembles energy as dropsy resembles health.

The tyrants have sought constantly to make us retreat into servitude by the paths of moderantism; and sometimes they have also tried to drive us to the opposite extreme. Both extremes end at the same point. Whether overshoot or undershoot, the target is missed in both cases. Nothing resembles the apostle of federalism more closely than the untimely preacher of the single universal Republic. The friend of kings and the public prosecutor of the human race understand one another quite well. The scapular-wearing fanatic and the fanatic preaching atheism have many similarities. Democratic barons are the brothers of the Koblenz marquises; and sometimes red bonnets are closer to red high heels than one might think.

But here government needs to be extremely circumspect, for the enemies of liberty are looking to turn against it not only its faults, but also its wisest measures. Is the government coming down on what is called exaggeration? They seek to revive moderantism and aristocracy. If it turns its attention to those two monsters, they promote exaggeration with all their might. It is dangerous to leave them the means to mislead the zeal of good citizens; it is more dangerous still to encourage and persecute the good citizens they have deceived. Through one of these abuses, the republic would be in danger of expiring in a convulsive movement; through the other, it would infallibly pine away.

So what should be done? Hunt down the culpable inventors of perfidious schemes; protect patriotism, even in its errors; enlighten patriots; and constantly raise the people to the level of its rights and destiny.

If you do not adopt this rule, you lose everything.

If we had to choose between an excess of patriotic fervour and the total absence of civic spirit, or the stagnation of moderantism, there would be no hesitation. A vigorous body, tormented by an excess of sap, leaves more resources than a corpse.

Above all we must be careful not to kill patriotism by trying to cure it. Patriotism is ardent by its nature. Who can love the homeland coldly? It is the gift particularly of simple men, not much given to calculating the political consequences of a civic step from its motive. Where is the patriot, even enlightened, who has never been deceived? Yes! If it is accepted that there are moderates and cowards of good faith, why should there not be patriots of good faith, who are sometimes carried away by a praiseworthy sentiment to go too far? So if we were to regard as criminals those in the revolutionary movement who might have strayed beyond the exact line drawn by prudence, we would be including in a common proscription, along with the bad citizens, all the natural friends of liberty, your own friends and the best supporters of the Republic. The adroit emissaries of tyranny, after having deceived them, would themselves then become their accusers and perhaps their judges too.

What then will disentangle all these nuances? What will trace the line of demarcation between all the contradictory excesses? Love of the homeland and truth. Kings and knaves will still be seeking to erase it; they want nothing to do with reason or with truth.

By sketching the duties of revolutionary government, we have marked the pitfalls that threaten it. The greater its power, the more free and rapid its action, the more it should be directed by good faith. On
the day it falls into impure or perfidious hands, liberty will be lost; its very name will become a pretext and excuse for counter-revolution; its energy will become that of a violent poison.

The confidence of the French people is attached to the character the National Convention has shown, rather than to the institution itself.

In placing all the power in your hands, it expected your government to be beneficent to patriots, as well as formidable to enemies of the homeland. It has given you the duty to deploy all the courage and the policy needed to crush them, and above all, at the same time, to maintain the unity you need among yourselves to fulfill your great destinies.

The foundation of the French Republic is not a game for children. It cannot be the work of whim or insouciance, nor the fortuitous outcome of the clash between all the individual claims and all the revolutionary elements. Wisdom, as much as power, presided over the creation of the universe. By imposing on members drawn from among you the formidable task of watching ceaselessly over the destiny of the homeland, you have imposed the obligation on yourselves to support them with your strength and confidence. If the revolutionary government is not seconded by the energy, enlightenment, patriotism and benevolence of all the people’s representatives, how can it have the strength to respond proportionately to the efforts of Europe which is attacking it, and to all the enemies of liberty pressing in on it from all sides?

Woe betide us if we open our souls to the treacherous insinuations of our enemies, who can vanquish us only by dividing us! Woe betide us if we break the bundle apart, instead of binding it; if private interests, if offended vanity be heard instead of the homeland and the truth!

Let us raise our souls to the height of republican virtues and examples from antiquity. Themistocles had more genius than the Lacedaemonian general commanding the Greek fleet: however, when the general answered a much-needed piece of advice meant to save the country by raising his baton to strike him, Themistocles merely said ‘Strike then, but listen’, and Greece triumphed over the Asian tyrant. Scipio was worth as much as any Roman general: Scipio, after conquering Hannibal and Carthage, gloried in serving under the orders of his enemy. O virtue of great hearts! In your presence, what are all the agitations of pride and all the pretensions of small souls? O virtue, are you less necessary for founding a Republic than for governing it in peace? O homeland, have you fewer claims on the representatives of the French people, than Greece and Rome had on their generals? What am I saying? If among us

the functions of revolutionary administration are no longer laborious duties but objects of ambition, then the Republic is already lost.

The authority of the National Convention needs to be respected by all Europe; it is to degrade it, it is to wipe it out that the tyrants are exhausting all the resources of their policy, and lavishing their treasure. The Convention needs to take a firm resolution to prefer its own government to that of the London cabinet and all the courts in Europe; for if it does not govern, the tyrants will reign.

And what advantages would they not have in this war of ruse and corruption they are waging on the Republic! All the vices are fighting for them: the Republic only has virtues on its side. Virtues are simple, modest, poor, often ignorant, sometimes rough; they are the prerogative of the unfortunate, and the heritage of the people. Vices are surrounded by every treasure, armed with all the charms of luxury and all the lures of perfidy; they are flanked by all the dangerous talents used for crime.

With what depth of artistry the tyrants turn against us, I will not say our passions and weaknesses, but our very patriotism!

And with what rapidity the seeds of division they throw among us could develop, if we do not hasten to stifle them!

Thanks to five years of betrayal and tyranny, thanks to an excess of improvidence and credulity, thanks to a few robust strokes too readily withdrawn in pusillanimous repentance, Austria, England, Russia, Prussia and Italy have had time to establish a secret government in France, the French government’s rival. They too have their committees, their treasury, their agents; that government is acquiring the strength we are removing from our own; it has the unity we have long lacked, the policy we are too inclined to think we can do without, the spirit of consistency, and the concerted approach we have not always felt to be necessary.

And for some time, the foreign courts have been vomiting over France all the cunning scoundrels they have in their pay. Their agents still infest our armies; the very victory at Toulon proves it: it took all the dash of the soldiers, all the fidelity of the generals, all the heroism of the people’s representatives, to triumph over that betrayal. They deliberate in our administrations, our section assemblies; they infiltrate our clubs; they have even sat in the sanctuary of national representation; they are controlling and will indefinitely control counter-revolution on the same level.

They prowl about us; they overhear our secrets; they flatter our passions; they seek to influence us even in our opinions; they turn our
resolutions against us. Are you weak? They praise your prudence. Are you prudent? They accuse you of weakness; they call your courage temerity; your justice, cruelty. Treat them well, they conspire publicly; threaten them, and they conspire in the shadows, behind a mask of patriotism. Yesterday they were murdering the defenders of liberty; today they are attending their funerals, and demanding divine honours for them, while awaiting the chance to slaughter their fellows. Is it time to ignite civil war? They preach all the follies of superstition. Is the civil war about to be extinguished by the floods of French blood? They abjure their priesthood and their gods to reignite it.

Englishmen, Prussians, have been seen spreading through our towns and countryside, announcing senseless doctrines in the name of the National Convention; unfrocked priests have been seen at the head of seditious gatherings, for which religion was the motive or pretext. Already, patriots led into imprudent acts by hatred of fanaticism alone have been murdered; blood has already flowed in a number of districts as a result of these deplorable quarrels, as if we had too much blood to fight the tyrants of Europe. O shame! O the weakness of human reason! A great nation looking like the plaything of the most despicable lackeys of tyranny!

For some time foreigners have appeared the arbiters of public tranquility. Money flowed or vanished at their will; when they wished it, the people found bread; mobs formed and dissipated outside bakers' doors at their signal. They surround us with their hired murderers and spies; we know it, we see it, and yet they live! They seem inaccessible to the blade of the law. It is more difficult, even today, to punish an important conspirator than to snatch a friend of liberty from the hands of calumny.

Hardly had we begun to denounce the falsely philosophic excesses provoked by enemies of France; hardly had patriotism pronounced in this chamber the word ultra-revolutionary, to designate them; before the traitors in Lyons, all the partisans of tyranny, hastened to apply it to hot-blooded and generous patriots who had avenged the people and the law. On one hand they are reviving the former system of persecution against friends of the Republic; on the other they plead indulgence for scoundrels dripping with the homeland's blood.

Meanwhile their crimes accumulate; impious cohorts of foreign emissaries are recruited day after day; France is flooded with them; they await, and will await indefinitely, a moment favourable to their sinister designs. They are digging in, billeting themselves in our midst; they are raising new counter-revolutionary redoubts and batteries, while the tyrants who pay them are assembling new armies.

Yes, these perfidious emissaries who talk to us, who flatter us, are the brothers, the accomplices of the ferocious parasites who ravage our crops, who have taken possession of our cities and our vessels bought by their masters, who have massacred our brothers, pitilessly slaughtered our prisoners, our wives, our children, the representatives of the French people. What am I saying? The monsters who committed those crimes are less atrocious than the wretches who tear secretly at our entrails; yet they still breathe, they still conspire unpunished!

They only await leaders to rally them; they are seeking them from among you. Their main object is to set us at odds with each other. That disastrous struggle would raise the hopes of the aristocracy, revive the plots of federalism; it would avenge the Girondin faction for the law that punished its crimes; it would punish the Mountain for its sublime devotion; for it is the Mountain, or rather the Convention, that they are attacking by dividing it and destroying its work.

As for ourselves, we will make war only on the English, the Prussians, the Austrians and their accomplices. It is by exterminating them that we will reply to these libels. We can hate only the enemies of the homeland.

We should strike terror not into the hearts of patriots or unfortunates, but into the dens of foreign brigands where the spoils are shared and the blood of the French people is drunk.

The Committee has noted that the law was not prompt enough in punishing major culprits. Foreigners, known agents of the allied kings; generals stained with the blood of Frenchmen, former accomplices of Dumouriez, Custine and Lamarlière, have been under arrest for some time and have not been tried.

The conspirators are many; they seem to be multiplying, and examples of that sort are rare. Punishing a hundred obscure and subordinate culprits is less useful to liberty than executing the head of a conspiracy.

The members of the Revolutionary Tribunal, whose patriotism and fairness are generally praiseworthy, have themselves pointed out to the Committee of Public Safety the causes that sometimes hamper its workings without making them more certain, and have asked us for the reform of a law still bearing the marks of the unhappy time when it was made. We propose to authorize the Committee to submit some appropriate changes to you, which would also tend to make the workings of justice even more propitious to innocence, and at the same
time inescapable for crime and intrigue. You even charged it with this task already, in an earlier decree.

We propose, as of this moment, that you hasten the trial of the foreigners and generals accused of conspiracy with the tyrants who are making war on us.

It is not enough to frighten the enemies of the homeland; its defenders should be helped. We will therefore ask your legal system to include some arrangements in favour of the soldiers who are fighting and suffering for liberty.

The French army is not only the terror of tyrants; it is the glory of the nation and humanity: when marching to victory, our virtuous warriors cry: Long live the Republic; when they fall to enemy steel, their cry is: Long live the Republic. Their last words are hymns to liberty, their last sighs good wishes for the homeland. If all the chiefs had been worthy of the troops, Europe would have been vanquished long ago. Any act of beneficence towards the army is an act of national gratitude.

The assistance given to defenders of the homeland and their families seems to us to be too modest. We believe that it could be increased by a third without problems. The Republic’s immense financial resources make this measure possible; the homeland is clamouring for it.

It also seemed to us that crippled soldiers, and the widows and children of those who have died for the homeland, were finding the formalities required by law, the multiplicity of application forms, and sometimes the coldness or malevolence of certain junior officials, difficult enough to delay the enjoyment of the benefits to which the law entitles them. We thought that the remedy to this problem would be to give them unofficial defenders established by law, to help them with the means to secure their rights.

For all these reasons, we submit to you the following decree:

The National Convention decrees:

Article I – The public prosecutor of the Revolutionary Tribunal will without delay bring to trial Dietrich,15 Custine the son of the general punished by the law, Biron,16 des Brulys, Barthélemy,17 and all the generals and officers accused of complicity with Dumouriez, Custine, Lamarthière and Houchard. He will bring to trial in the same way the foreigners, bankers and other individuals charged with treason and connivance with the kings allied against the French Republic.

II – The Committee of Public Safety will report, in the shortest time possible, on ways of improving the organization of the Revolutionary Tribunal.

III – The assistance and compensation payments granted under earlier decrees to defenders of the homeland wounded while fighting for it, or to the widows and children of those killed, are increased by a third.

IV – A commission will be created and charged with facilitating the means to enjoy the benefits to which they are entitled by law.

V – The members of this commission will be appointed by the National Convention, on nomination by the Committee of Public Safety.
9 Mucius Scaevola (end of sixth century BC): legendary Roman hero who, during the war against the Etruscans, slipped into the enemy camp in order to kill Porsena. Imprisoned by the Etruscans, he let his right hand be burnt in the fire rather than denounce his accomplices.
10 See note 7 of chapter 9, this volume.
11 See note 4 of chapter 2, this volume.
12 Octavian, Antony and Lepidus: triumvirate who shared power in the Roman Republic after Caesar's death (44 BC).
13 Sejanus (20BC–31 AD): Emperor Tiberius' praetorian prefect.
14 Brutus and Cassius: the assassins of Julius Caesar.
15 Reference to Jean-Baptiste Drouet, deputy in the Convention, imprisoned by the Austrians at the end of October 1793.
16 Bailie (Pierre Marie, 1750–93) and Beauvais (Charles Nicolas Beauvais de Précou, 1745–94): two représentants en mission sent to Toulon by the Convention and imprisoned by the royalists in July 1793. Bailie committed suicide in prison and Beauvais died a few months after his liberation.
17 Gasparin: représentant en mission, killed in the town of Orange on 11 November 1793.

13 ON THE PRINCIPLES OF REVOLUTIONARY GOVERNMENT

2 See ‘Revolutionary Government’ in Glossary.
3 Toulon was taken back from the English on 19 December 1793.
4 The latter is a reproach vis-à-vis the ‘ultra-revolutionaries’, especially for their policy of ‘dechristianization’.
5 Reference to Anarcharis Cloots who was called ‘the orator of the human race’ and whom Robespierre criticized for his ‘atheist’ positions.
6 See note 11 of chapter 5, this volume.
7Themistocles: Athenian magistrate who won the Battle of Salamis against the Persians (480 BC).
8 Scipio Africanus defeated Hannibal in 202 BC and captured Cathage, Rome’s great rival.
9 See Glossary.
10 See Glossary.
11 Reference to Collot d’Herbois and Fouche who had repressed anti-revolutionary activity in Lyons; Fouche was accused of excesses.
12 See Glossary.
13 See note 9 of chapter 10, this volume.
14 See Glossary.
15 Baron de Dietrich (1748–93): supporter of a constitutional monarchy, he tried to raise Strasbourg in revolt after 10 August 1792 before emigrating; on his return he was condemned to death and guillotined.
16 Biron, Armand Louis de Gontaut (1747–93): a liberal noble, he held a number of military posts before being accused of a lack of enthusiasm by the Convention; he was condemned and guillotined in July 1793.
17 Brulys (Ernault de Bignac des) 1757–1809: Chief of Staff of the three armies of the North, Belgium and the Ardennes in April 1793. Suspended in August 1793, arrested and imprisoned, he was only released after the fall of Robespierre. Barthélemy (François de) 1747–1830: French ambassador to the Swiss cantons 1792 to 1797.

14 ON THE PRINCIPLES OF POLITICAL MORALITY THAT SHOULD GUIDE THE NATIONAL CONVENTION IN THE DOMESTIC ADMINISTRATION OF THE REPUBLIC

2 The Ventôse decrees were supposed to sequester the goods of the ‘enemies of the revolution’ and share them out among the poor; they had only begun to be applied before they were cut short.
3 Roman historian (55–120 AD).
5 Tiberius and Vespasion: Roman emperors (14–37 AD) and (69–79 AD).
6 Lycurgus: mythical Spartan legislator (ninth century BC).
7 Agis: king of Sparta in the fourth century BC who tried to restore Lycurgus’ laws.
8 Demosthenes was the Athenian leader (384–322 BC) who led the resistance against the Macedonian king, Philip.
9 Miltiades (540–489 BC): Athenian general who was commander at the Battle of Marathon (490 BC) against the Persians.
10 See note 5 of chapter 2, this volume.
11 See chapter 6, p. 42.
12 Caesar, Piso, Clodius: rival chiefs competing for power at the end of the Roman Republic (first century BC).
13 Reference to Anarcharis Cloots; see note 5 of chapter 13, this volume.
14 Caligula and Heliogabalus: Roman emperors notorious for their great cruelty (37–41 and 218–222 AD).
VIRTUE
AND TERROR

MAXIMILIEN ROBESPIERRE

INTRODUCTION BY SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

TEXTS SELECTED AND ANNOTATED BY JEAN DUCANGE
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(2007)