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Robespierre, Desmoulins and the Trial of the Indulgents



This is another question I received in my Tumblr asks. Someone asked me how Robespierre felt about Camille Desmoulins's arrest and execution, considering that Camille was not just a political ally but an old friend, and whether Camille himself blamed Robespierre once he was in prison.

It's a difficult question, mostly because we have much more evidence for Camille's state of mind than Robespierre's. Camille wrote from prison, drafted notes for his defence, and left enough behind for us to follow at least some of what he was thinking. Robespierre left us nothing comparable.

As usual, I'm going to give a bit of context for anyone who is not very familiar with Desmoulins and Robespierre, so feel free to skip straight to the fourth section if you just want the actual answer. Yes, I

know, I'm unbearably long-winded as usual. □

How close were Camille and Robespierre?

Before we look at the messy, tragic business of April 1794, it is worth establishing just how close these two men actually were.

They started out as scholarship boys at the prestigious Louis-le-Grand college in Paris. Robespierre was a couple of years older, but they became fast friends.⁽¹⁾ By the early years of the Revolution, they were fighting alongside one another. They were so politically aligned that in March 1791, Camille proudly declared in print that he and Robespierre were the “Jacobins of the Jacobins.” Camille frequently used his journal to praise his “dear college comrade,” famously calling him one of the “two Catos⁽²⁾ of the Legislature.” He worshipped the man, praising his absolute incorruptibility and describing his speeches as “sublime.”

Their relationship went beyond politics. When Camille married Lucile Duplessis on 29 December 1790, Robespierre was one of the official witnesses. Shortly afterwards, he wrote to tease Camille for getting too wrapped up in married life and neglecting politics: Robespierre informed “Monsieur Camille” that Lucile’s beautiful eyes were no excuse for ignoring his work on the national guards. That is not the tone of a distant acquaintance. He even bounced their infant son, Horace, on his knee.⁽³⁾

Robespierre also sometimes gave Camille feedback on his work before it went to print. Before the publication of the highly influential *Histoire des Brissotins*⁽⁴⁾, for instance, he read the proofs and urged him to remove certain passages attacking the Committee of Public Safety, warning him not to lose sight of the real target. Camille listened.

The Fracture

So how does a friendship like that unravel? Very publicly.

Things began to go wrong in the winter of 1793-1794. Alongside Georges Danton, Desmoulins launched a campaign for moderation and clemency through his new journal, *Le Vieux Cordelier*. At first, Robespierre approved. He even read and approved the proofs of the second issue, which attacked the “exaggerated” revolutionaries driving the de-Christianising movement. For a brief moment, *Le Vieux Cordelier* was widely seen as reflecting the line of both Danton and Robespierre.

Then Camille published the third issue.

There, drawing on Tacitus⁽⁵⁾, he sketched a thinly veiled and deeply unsettling parallel between revolutionary France and the paranoid despotism of imperial Rome. Robespierre was clearly alarmed. But even then, he was not yet ready to abandon his friend.

As the backlash mounted in early January 1794, Robespierre tried to contain the damage. The Jacobins⁽⁶⁾ summoned Camille to explain himself, and Robespierre stepped in to calm the room. He described Desmoulins as an *enfant étourdi*, a spoiled or heedless child, well intentioned but led astray by bad company.

It was a patronising defence, but it was still a defence. Robespierre offered the club a compromise: the offending issues of the journal should be burned, but Camille himself should remain among the Jacobins.

It was, politically speaking, a lifeline. And Camille, demonstrating a truly spectacular lack of survival instinct, refused it.

Proud and unwilling to retreat, he answered Robespierre with a line from Rousseau: “Burning is no answer!”⁽⁷⁾ The rebuke landed badly. Robespierre, stung and angered, warned that if Camille were anyone else, such writings would not have been treated so lightly.

What is striking, though, is that even after this very public humiliation, Robespierre still did not entirely let him go. On 8 January, he tried to prevent the Jacobins from reading and discussing yet another controversial issue of the journal. And when the club voted on 10 January to expel Desmoulins, Robespierre intervened at the last moment and secured his reinstatement.

The Downfall of the Indulgents

The public dressing-down did nothing to stop Camille. He kept publishing.

He remained a leading voice among the Indulgents, the faction arguing that, now that the Republic was winning its wars, the worst of the crisis had passed⁽⁸⁾. Danton wanted, quite simply, to enjoy the Republic. He thought the time had come to negotiate peace, which in turn meant making France appear a little less ferociously revolutionary. The Indulgents called for a general amnesty and the mass release of suspects.

Robespierre thought all this dangerously premature. He argued that it was frivolous to treat a few military victories as proof that the danger had passed. He feared, not without reason, that opening the prisons would unleash a violent counter-revolutionary reaction and tear the young Republic apart.

He was also thoroughly unimpressed by Danton’s vision of a more relaxed Republic. Robespierre accused the Indulgents of treating the people like a herd to be exploited for their own luxury.

But his loudest attacks were aimed mainly at Danton. So why was Camille executed?

Because Robespierre was not a dictator.

For all the mythology that grew up around him, Maximilien did not possess absolute power over life and death. He was only one member of a committee of twelve, and Camille, with his viciously sharp pen, had managed to alienate a great many of them. Men like Barère, Billaud-Varenne, and Collot d’Herbois had every reason to fear what he might write if left at liberty. Saint-Just despised him, which did not help.

Camille, or rather his writings, was also becoming dangerous to the Revolutionary Government, because they publicly undermined both its justification and its methods at a time when Robespierre still believed severe measures were essential to save the Republic.

All this led to an arrest and trial that was, to put it mildly, procedurally dubious.

Danton and Desmoulins were deliberately bundled into a show trial alongside foreigners and corrupt

financiers. The government wanted to compromise the political defendants by association, leaning heavily on the idea of a vast “Foreign Plot”⁽⁹⁾.

The difficulty was that the trial was public. Danton rose to the occasion and used his formidable gifts as an orator to batter the prosecution and win the sympathy of the galleries. He demanded that sixteen members of the Convention be called as witnesses. The court officials, alarmed by the possibility of an acquittal, turned to the Committee of Public Safety.

To stop Danton from swaying public opinion any further, a rumour was spread that a prison uprising was being prepared⁽¹⁰⁾, and the Convention passed a decree allowing any prisoner who “resisted or insulted” national justice to be silenced.

The tribunal used that decree to exclude the defendants from the proceedings. They were stripped of the right to defend themselves. Then, with the accused removed, the judge and prosecutor further manipulated the jury by secretly showing them a mysterious forged letter at the last moment.

The death sentence was delivered on the fourth day. The Indulgents were sent to the guillotine that same afternoon, on 5 April 1794.

Did Desmoulins blame Robespierre?

So how did Camille actually feel about his arrest and impending execution? After that long detour, we finally come to your question.

You might expect him to have felt utterly betrayed by his old friend. You might imagine him cursing Robespierre to hell. And yes, the sense of betrayal was clearly there. In an unsent letter to Lucile, written from prison, he seems shocked: “But Robespierre, who signed the order for my dungeon! But the republic, after all I have done for it! That is the price I receive for so many virtues and sacrifices!”

He did blame Robespierre for his imprisonment. But he did not blame Robespierre alone. In fact, he seems to have clung, even then, to the hope that his old college friend might still intervene and save him.

From his cell, he told Lucile that he was writing to Maximilien, adding: “no doubt he will answer you.” Lucile herself shared that hope, drafting her own appeal to Robespierre and reminding him of their long closeness.

When Camille drafted notes for his defence, he did not direct a single reproach at Robespierre. Instead, he reserved all his anger at the other men on the Committee⁽¹¹⁾. Politically, he seems to have tried to align himself, at least in part, with Robespierre. Whether that reflected genuine belief, or a last attempt not to estrange the only man he thought might still save him, we cannot know.

Camille was not blind to the reality of his situation. He seems to have understood that his fall was not simply the work of one man, but the result of a broader political purge, helped along by his own choices. In his final letter, he wrote that he was dying for two very specific things: his sharp, mocking pen, and his steadfast friendship with Danton. He denounced his “assassins” and the cowardice of his colleagues in the Convention, who had abandoned him and Danton to slander. Right to the end, he seems to have seen himself as a man destroyed for his courage.

Did Robespierre feel guilty?

While Camille left behind a clear paper trail from prison that allows us to glimpse his state of mind, Robespierre did not. There are no personal diaries, and no private letters in which he set down what he felt about the condemnation of two of his oldest political companions. If we want to understand his reaction, we are therefore forced to look at what he did, not at what he may have felt.

On 5 April 1794, the day Danton and Desmoulins went to the guillotine, Robespierre presented a public face of complete firmness. Nineteenth-century writers loved to dramatise the moment, imagining him pale and shaken in his room at the Duplay house, deeply affected by the sound of the carts carrying the condemned to execution ⁽¹²⁾. It is, for sure, an evocative image, but as far as I know, there is no real evidence for it.

What we do know is that he went to the Jacobin Club that very evening. There, he spoke, urged the members to remain vigilant, and insisted that the Republic could not relax its severe measures. In public, at least, he showed no sign of grief.

That said, it is possible that the whole episode took a heavy physical toll on him. Robespierre had a long history of falling ill during moments of extreme political strain. His punishing workload and austere way of life already left him physically fragile, prone to exhaustion and nervous collapse ⁽¹³⁾.

After the trial and executions, his health seems to have deteriorated sharply. He continued to appear in public for about ten days, then suddenly disappeared. By 19 April, he had withdrawn completely and would remain absent until 7 May.

When he returned, just after his thirty-sixth birthday, several contemporaries thought him changed. Paul Barras, who saw him during this period, described a man so pale and unnaturally still that he compared his face to marble and to the dead. Barras is hardly a neutral witness, and his testimony should be treated with caution, but the basic fact remains: Robespierre was away for three weeks because he was, apparently, seriously unwell.

Was this because of Camille's loss? There is no way to know for certain, and we can only speculate. My educated guess (so do not take it as absolute truth) is that the physical decline was most likely due to an accumulation of factors ⁽¹⁴⁾ but the loss of a close friend certainly did not help.

() Notes

- 1 In *Twelve Who Ruled*, R. R. Palmer goes so far as to describe their dynamic like this: “Maximilien looked on Camille, who was two years his junior, almost as on a younger brother who must be protected from his own caprices.” This strikes me as a bit exaggerated, but it is safe to say they were exceptionally good friends.
- 2 Cato was Marcus Porcius Cato (Cato the Younger), a Roman statesman famous for his fierce moral integrity, stoicism, and unwavering defence of the Roman Republic against Julius Caesar.
- 3 In 1794, when Camille was in prison, Lucile drafted a heartbreaking, unfinished letter to Robespierre begging for her husband’s life. She reminded him of their intimacy, recalling how he had joined their hands in marriage and bounced their son on his knees.
- 4 *Histoire des Brissotins* was a highly influential and fiercely satirical pamphlet published by Camille Desmoulins in mid-1793. It ruthlessly attacked the Girondin faction (often called Brissotins after their leader, Jacques-Pierre Brissot), successfully destroying their public reputation and paving the way for their political purge and eventual execution.
- 5 Publius Cornelius Tacitus was a Roman historian who chronicled the reigns of the Roman emperors, heavily focusing on the corruption, paranoia, and tyranny of absolute power. By using Tacitus, Camille was not-so-subtly implying that the Committee of Public Safety had become the very despots they claimed to be fighting.
- 6 The Jacobin Club was the most famous and influential political club of the French Revolution.
- 7 Robespierre famously was very into Rousseau, so quoting Rousseau at him was a “burn” in modern terms.
- 8 It is worth noting their motives were not exactly pure. The Indulgent campaign was heavily motivated by corruption and self-preservation. They were actively seeking to protect political allies implicated in massive financial scandals, such as the liquidation of the India Company.
- 9 The “foreign plot” refers to a persistent, paranoid conspiracy theory that alleged that various domestic factions were secretly funded by hostile foreign power, primarily William Pitt’s Britain, to deliberately destabilise and destroy the Republic from within.
- 10 The gist of the “prison plot” was that inmates across Paris, coordinated by people on the outside like Lucile Desmoulins, were stockpiling weapons and plotting to break out, slaughter the government committees, and overthrow the Republic. It ends up being the basis for Lucile’s arrest and execution.
- 11 He directed his fury entirely at men like Louis Antoine de Saint-Just, Bertrand Barère, and Jean-Marie Collot d’Herbois.
- 12 Nineteenth-century historians like Jules Michelet and Romain Rolland largely invented these vivid, psychological scenes to add dramatic flair to the narrative. The execution carts carrying Camille and the other condemned men did pass in front of the Duplay residence on the rue Saint-Honoré, which is where Robespierre lived. However, the dramatic scene where Danton and Desmoulins are shown in the same cart, shouting insults, threats, or pleas at a silent Robespierre hiding behind closed shutters is a myth. There are no direct testimonies or immediate historical accounts that support these dramatic exchanges having actually happened.

13 His doctor, Joseph Souberbielle, regularly treated him for a bleeding varicose ulcer on his leg, but unfortunately did not investigate or manage the nature of his deeper, more systemic exhaustion.

14 ...his incredible workload being a primary one.

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