Blood and Carnations: The Role of Violence in Revolutions Through the Theories of

Maximilien Robespierre and Immanuel Kant

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Revolutions

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On November 9, 1799, cheers of the people echoed in the streets of Paris, filled with joy over the revolutionary success. They cried and laughed, imagining the prospects of their new future. However, only a select few would ultimately benefit from these changes, and for others, those smiles would not endure. For many, it was not victory that was on their mind, but rather, it was the death of millions of Parisians — their lives unwarranted ramifications of the revolution. Thus, one of the enduring questions that continues to trouble political and social theorists may be articulated as this: what role does violence play in revolutions? Is violence conducive to ushering in the revolutionised world? This paper will argue that in the French Revolution, violence played a pivotal role by destabilising existing power structures, yet this phenomenon is not the primary catalyst of all revolutions. Rather, violence often emerges as an amplifier of urgency for societal transformation, being conducive but not imperative for revolution, demonstrated in the Portuguese Carnation Revolution.

This paper will first examine the significance of violence in revolutions in terms of French Jacobin Maximilien Robespierre's advocacy for virtue and terror. I will then explore German Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant's nuanced denunciation of violence's role in revolutions which explicitly critiques Robespierre's account of violence in the French Revolution. Secondly, it will explore violence as an instrument of political change, following the beliefs of Robespierre, as seen in the French Revolution. Finally, it will discuss the historical counterexample to the Robespierre theory — the absence of violence in the Portuguese Carnation Revolution and how peaceful means were able to overthrow the longest surviving authoritarian regime of Western Europe.

Before proceeding, it is important for me to define two major concepts. Defining revolution is not an easy task and it does not have a single answer.[1] In antiquity, revolutions were recognised as a change in the form of the government, specifically in changing the

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[1] Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 12-13, https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511815805.

constitution. However, the modern definition of revolutions is the way to achieve and unlock the 'perfect' future, a concept that rests on the progressive idea of history. This idea is amplified by Chinese human rights activist Liu Xiaobo who sees revolutions as working as a kind of talisman, describing the latter as "a precondition for the righteousness of any other thing", being "progressive and full of righteous sentiment." [2] In this paper, I will be addressing revolutions in a modern light — a transformation of society and the state, not just the government. Additionally, "'violence' is one of the most confused terms in our moral vocabulary." [3] There is a lot of scholarship on the definition of revolutionary violence, with Karl Marx believing that "the violent overthrow of the bourgeoisie lays the foundation for the sway of the proletariat" and Martin Luther King Jr. describing the phenomenon as "impractical because it is a descending spiral ending in destruction for all." [4] [5] For the purpose of this paper, I will define revolutionary violence as when any means of force — whether by the regular armed forces or by guerrilla, terrorist or other subversive tactics — is used to achieve a social, political, economic, cultural or ideological revolution. Such violent means may result in social or national disintegration, counter-revolution and foreign intervention, or even repression.

I: Different Views on Revolutionary Violence

I will now explore the different interpretations of revolutionary violence of Robespierre and Kant.

Maximilien Robespierre, a French lawyer and statesman was a key figure in the French Revolution as a member of the Jacobin political party, best known for spearheading

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[2] Xiaobo, Liu. "That holy word, 'Revolution.'" In Routledge eBooks, 309–24, 2018. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429494826-21.
[3] Norman R. *Ethics, Killing and War*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 36, https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/ethics-killing-and-war/11E85F3813BE0F7FFD9470B7F4AF1199.
[4] Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "Communist Manifesto (Chapter 1)," n.d., https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm.
[5] Martin Luther King Jr. "The Nobel Peace Prize 1964," NobelPrize.org, n.d., https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1964/king/lecture/#:~:text=Violence%20is%20impractical%20because%20it,on%20hatred%20rather%20than%20love.

the Reign of Terror. Robespierre had complex and evolving views on revolutionary violence, saying that "terror is nothing else than swift, severe, indomitable justice."[6] This quote from his Speech to the National Convention in 1794 demonstrates his view that revolutionary violence was a form of transformative justice necessary to create a new social order; a tool to dismantle the old regime and establish a more equitable society. He advocated that "virtue without terror is powerless, terror without virtue is evil", explaining how "virtue, without which terror is fatal; terror, without which virtue is impotent."[7] Thus, Robespierre was a strong advocate for revolutionary violence, believing that the latter was justified in defence of revolutions and as a means to establish a virtuous republic. However, his policies led to widespread repression, loss of life, and the suppression of political dissent, as demonstrated through the brutal outcomes of the Reign of Terror.

Contrariwise, German philosopher Immanuel Kant was critical of arbitrary and unjust violence, even in revolutionary contexts. Although Kant was known as an ardent supporter of the spirit of the French Revolution, saying how "such a phenomenon in human history will not be forgotten, because it has revealed a tendency and faculty in human nature for improvement", he strongly criticised the pervasive violence prominent throughout the revolution on the basis that violence contradicts the principles of morality and rationality.[8] [9] Whilst Kant acknowledged the right to revolt as a response to tyranny and injustice, he was critical of excessive violence and disorderly upheaval, which he believed could undermine the rule of law and respect for human rights. He argued that revolutions should be conducted within a framework of lawful principles and moral constraints, condemning the violent actions during the French Revolution. Overall, Kant deplored violent means of usurping

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[6] Robespierre, Maximilien. "Speech to National Convention: The Terror Justified." In *Pageant of Europe*, 2n ed., 404–5. Harcourt Brace, 1947. http://impactwhap.weebly.com/uploads/1/2/1/8/12181994/robespierre_terror_justified.pdf.

[7] Robespierre, "Speech to National Convention".

[8] "12 Questions About Kant's Opposition to Revolution | Virtue, Rules, and Justice: Kantian Aspirations | Oxford Academic," n.d. https://academic.oup.com/book/5074/chapter-abstract/147641158?redirectedFrom=fulltext#:~:text=He%20was%20known%20as%20a,hope%20for%20continuing%20moral%20progress.

[9] Kant, Immanuel. "The Conflict of the Faculties (1798)." In *Cambridge University Press eBooks*, 233–328, 1996. https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511814433.007.

power, believing that the people must endure even "the most unbearable abuse of supreme authority". According to Kant, it does not matter how unjust or repressive a government may be, there is no right on the part of the subjects to revolt.[10] Instead, he proposed that the best way to create the conditions of peace is the establishment of the modern, constitutional state as an impartial arbiter between competing claims.[11]

II: The French Revolution

I will now explore whether violence in revolutions was deemed to be a necessary condition in the context of said revolutions through exploring the perpetual and excessive role violence played in the French Revolution (1789-1799). Described by Mallary A. Silva as "a stain in history," the French Revolution was defined by riots, executions, military actions, slave revolts and other forms of inherent violence, both propelling the revolution forward and creating "one of the bloodiest periods in modern civilisation."[12]

To provide context regarding the cause of the revolution, towards the end of the 18th century, France was on the brink of bankruptcy. This was as a result of France's costly involvement in the American Revolution as well as King Louis XVI's extravagant spending, all on top of several years of poor harvests, drought, and skyrocketing bread prices. This economic turmoil coupled with social equality, where French society was divided into three estates – the clergy, the nobility and the commoners – kindled unrest among peasants and the urban poor. Thus, on June 17, 1789, the Third Estate established the National Assembly, vowing not to disperse until constitutional reform had been achieved. Following their beliefs of popular sovereignty, these Parisian revolutionaries stormed the Bastille, a symbol of royal authority and despotism, to seize weapons and gunpowder, demonstrating their defiance against the monarchy. The storming of the Bastille "marked a turning point in the French

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[10] Cummiskey, David. "Justice and Revolution in Kant's Political Philosophy." *Chapter Nine*, 2021. http://cms-content.bates.edu/prebuilt/justice.pdf.

[11] Alpert, Avram. "Philosophy Against and in Praise of Violence: Kant, Thoreau and the Revolutionary Spectator." *Theory, Culture & Society* 33, no. 6 (July 9, 2016): 51–73. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276416651976.

[12] Silva, Mallary A. "Degrees of Violence in the French Revolution." Inquiries Journal, January 1, 2010. http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/142/degrees-of-violence-in-the-french-revolution.

Revolution", demonstrating that the people could rise against established power, but would also resort to violence to achieve revolutionary change.[13]

This vicious start to the revolution foreshadowed a series of violent events which would characterise the French Revolution — March to Versailles (1789), September Massacres of (1792), Revolt in Lyon (1793)... However, the most gruesome event which "transformed the Revolution from a liberating to a destructive force" was the Reign of Terror which raged from 1792 to 1794.[14]

The Reign of Terror was "an uncomfortably violent period that cannot be justified by state success as with the American Revolution, whose purpose was questionable at best, and whose explanation was integral to understanding of the French Revolution as a whole."[15] Following Robespierre's Jacobinism beliefs discussed previously in this paper, the Terror saw the execution of as much as sixteen thousand Frenchmen with around ten times that amount imprisoned and interrogated by Revolutionary Tribunals. Despite the initial support for the revolt,, the Revolutionary government began to question Robespierre's motives. An event that had initially claimed to be "a consequence of the general principle of democracy applied to our country's most pressing needs", had revealed itself to be a ploy for power over life and death. Thus, on July 28 1794, Robespierre met an ironic death as he was executed amongst cries of "Down with him! Down with him!" from what was left of French society.[16]

Following Robespierre's demise, the Committee of Public Safety lost its credibility and France saw the return of bourgeois values, corruption and further military failure. In 1799, a military coup led by Napoleon Bonaparte overthrew the Directory and established

[13] S.L. Immersion France. "A Decisive Turning Point in the French Revolution," June 25, 2024. https://slimmersion-france.com/resources/culture/history/storming-bastille/.
[14] Charles Townshend. "The Reign of Terror | Terrorism: A Very Short Introduction | Oxford Academic," May 2018. https://academic.oup.com/book/683/chapter-abstract/135365699?redirectedFrom=fulltext.
[15] Turek, Aidan, "The Architecture of Violence: the Reign of Terror and the Character of Bloodshed". Senior Theses, Trinity College, Hartford, CT 2020. Trinity College Digital Repository, https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/theses/848.
[16] McKelvie, Callum, and All About History. "What Was the Reign of Terror?" livescience.com, October 20, 2021. https://www.livescience.com/reign-of-terror.html.

him as the first consul, with dictatorial powers. In 1804, Napoleon proclaimed himself

emperor of France, marking the beginning of the authoritarian Napoleonic eras.

III: The Role of Violence in Revolutions

The French Revolution advocated for the reformation of society from feudal

monarchy to republic. Revolutionaries like Robespierre held the belief that violence was

necessary to protect the revolution and achieve its goals — "the government of the revolution

is the despotism of liberty against tyranny".[17] However, in the intervening centuries since the

Revolution, nuanced and pedigreed debates emerged between scholars on the effectiveness of

violence in enforcing revolutionary change. For example, the Reign of Terror was justified by

its perpetrators as a necessary evil in a time of war, while being denounced by its victims as a

senseless bloodletting for the glory of Robespierre. Scholars like Barrington Moore wrote

about the Terror as a sort of purifying furnace — "if France were to enter the modern world

through the democratic door she had to pass through the fires of Revolution, including its

violent and radical aspects." Contrariwise, others argue that the Terror is "far too violent to be

justified by simply necessity, too bloody to be condensed to a single logic of total war as

some scholars do." [18]

Overall, despite the Jacobin justification that violence was an essential catalyst for

change and reform in France, it had the opposite desired impact. Instead, violence acted as a

source of intense political and social repression, propelling the liberal-driven France back

into an authoritarian, monarchical rule under Napoleon Bonaparte. Thus, some historians

consider the French Revolution as "mostly a failure because of the ineffective execution of

reforms and unnecessary massacre of lives."[19] In essence, Kant's refutation on Robespierre's

justification of violence provides insight on the ineffectiveness of violence in the French

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[17] Robespierre, Maximilien. "Robespierre, on Political Morality: From Censer & Hunt, CD ROM," 1794.
https://courses.washington.edu/hsteu302/Robespierre%20speech.htm#:~:text=The%20government%20of%20the%20revolution,one%20patriot%20will%20be%20left.
[18] Turek, Aidan, "The Architecture of Violence".
[19] ipl.org. "The Successes and Failures of the French Revolution," March 4, 2020.
https://www.ipl.org/essay/The-Successes-And-Failures-Of-The-French-FKBQN67ESCP6.

Revolution. Kant viewed the use of violence and terror as fundamentally incompatible with the principles of justice and morality, instead believing that lasting and just changes come through rational and lawful processes. So, the question has become: if violence is not conducive to revolutionary success, then is the effective alternative non-violence?

IV: The Carnation Revolution

The Portuguese Carnation Revolution stands as a successful example of a nonviolent revolution. This contrasts with the violent nature of the French Revolution and many other European revolutions, with 20th century Europe being described by Julius Ruff as "everywhere a violent age, characterised by frequent acts of collective violence".[20] The Carnation Revolution (April 25, 1974) was a pivotal event that brought down more than 40 years of dictatorship in Portugal — Europe's longest-surviving authoritarian regime. This nearly bloodless coup stands as a testament to the power of nonviolence in revolutionary success, paving the way for Portugal's modern political, social, and economic development as a democratic country.

To paint the picture of a pre-revolutionary Portugal, since 1933, the country had been under the authoritarian rule of the Estado Novo regime. This regime was nationalist in nature and ushered in an era of oppression and censorship, with Portuguese citizen João Baptista depicting the time as "a sort of 'grey age', a monochromatic standstill that lasted for 4 decades".[21] While these civil unrests were occurring, the nation was in the midst of a 13-year long colonial war, with many national movements rebelling against Portuguese rule in their African territories. In response to this conflict, the majority of the population "wanted to accelerate the decolonisation process" to put an end to the bloody and costly war, however

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[20] Ruff, Julius R. "Riots, Rebellions and Revolutions in Europe." In *Cambridge University Press eBooks*, 472–90, 2020. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316340592.025.
[21] Baptista, João. "What Was It Like to Live Under Estado Novo?," 2023. https://www.quora.com/What-was-it-like-to-live-under-Estado-Novo.

the Estado Novo strongly opposed this idea, plunging Portugal into a state of economic and intranational turmoil.[22]

Naturally, Portuguese citizens started to become restless and recalcitrant, and the Movimento das Forças Armadas (MFA) decided to stage a revolutionary civil resistance campaign in an attempt to overthrow the government. The MFA proposed a democratic regime that citizens yearned for, believing in a "peaceful transition to democracy through constitutional means", and the initially strictly military coup quickly gained widespread civilian support. Following the previously mentioned propositions of Sharp, this broad support was crucial in mobilising popular resistance against the Estado Novo regime and ensuring the success of the revolution.

In contrast to many other revolutionary movements of the 20th century that involved armed conflict and bloodshed, the Carnation Revolution was a "coup like no other" and was largely bloodless.[23] The military coup itself was executed with minimal violence, and once the supporters joined the movement, it remained remarkably peaceful. Many nonviolent approaches were taken to symbolise the peaceful intentions of the movement. To begin, just before midnight on the 24th of April, Portugal's entry to the Eurovision Song Contest - 'E Depois do Adeus' - was played on the radio to mark the start of the Revolution. This was soon followed by 'Grândola, Vila Morena' — a song representing revolution, democracy, and anti-facism which was banned by the government. This peaceful beginning is then reflected in the fact that no shots were fired towards the fascists by the revolutionaries, with civilians and military personnel instead coming together under the banner of non-violent resistance against the authoritarian regime. This unity and solidarity among different segments of Portuguese society not only helped minimise casualties, but also strengthened the movement and facilitated its success in overthrowing the dictatorship. Finally, red carnations were

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[22] Cason, James. "The Carnation Revolution – a Peaceful Coup in Portugal," 2009. https://adst.org/2015/04/the-carnation-revolution-a-peaceful-coup-in-portugal/.
[23] Kissinger, Henry. "The Carnation Revolution".

placed in the barrels of soldiers' rifles by the jubilant crowds to celebrate the overthrow of the government, further symbolising the peaceful resistance and unity of the Portuguese people which catalysed the reform of society into a democracy.

Ultimately, the Carnation Revolution was considered by most to be a huge success, with the first constitutional government coming into power and establishing a new Constitution two years after the revolution. Furthermore, the revolution marked the end of Portuguese colonialism, establishing the independence of former Portuguese territories. More than one million Portuguese citizens (the retornados) returned to Portugal, with Lisbon's socialist mayor, Fernando Medina, underlining Portugal's historical global identity as "a starting point for routes to discover new worlds, new people, new ideas" in 2019. Overall, it was the establishment of the new democratic government — the reintroduction of civil liberties which had previously been banned under Caetano's government; censorship was prohibited, political prisoners were released, and free speech and religion — that turned Portugal from being the "poorest and least developed of the western European powers" in the 20th century into the vibrant and diverse country that it is today.[24]

V: The Role of Non-Violence in Revolutions

So, why did non-violence work so effectively in the case of the Carnation Revolution? Unlike Robespierre's focus on violence as the catalyst for revolutionary change, the Portuguese followed the Kantian belief that conflicts should be resolved through legal and peaceful means rather than violence. Instead, the Portuguese turned to developing an ideology for a new regime based on widespread discontent, strengthening connections between the police/military and the public to minimise the potential for violence.

Overall, the key to the success of the Carnation Revolution lay in the trust and concord of the people, in accordance with American political scientist Gene Sharp's advocacy for peaceful methods as alternatives to revolutionary violence. In his book *From*

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[24] Encyclopedia Britannica. "History of Portugal," n.d. https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-Portugal.

Dictatorship to Democracy, Sharp proposed strategic principles and tactics related to staging nonviolent revolutions, arguing that nonviolent action can achieve political change without the destructive consequences associated with armed conflict. For Sharp, political authority depends on "pillars of support" from the people; but this is also the regime's "Achilles' heel".[25] For example, in the 2000 Bulldozer Revolution, the people of Serbia threw parties for the police whenever someone got arrested, resulting in a bond forming between the people and the police. This led the police chiefs to disobey Milosevich and instead support the people during the revolution, and the authority of the regime was sapped. Here, Sharp emphasises the power of the masses, explaining how "acceptance, submission, obedience and cooperation" are necessary sources of political power, thus implying that to overthrow an authoritarian regime somewhat peacefully, non-violent coercion in the form of mass defiance should be applied, resulting in all former assistance and obedience to fall away — "the regime simply falls to pieces". In the case of the Carnation Revolution, the widespread discontent with the Estado Novo resulted in a sense of unity and collective action against the regime, including the support from the military, thus strengthening the "pillars of support" and successfully undermining the authoritarian government.

Similarly, this nonviolent tactic also follows Dan Edelstein's take on the most successful method of overthrowing a tyrannical regime: "authority needs to be weakened, the legitimacy of the regime needs to be in question, and there needs to be some sense of solidarity between the police and the people."[26] Similar to Sharp's solution, Edelstein believes that unity among the people is fundamental to revolutions — if the general population and the defence forces are united, then violence is not necessary in revolutionary success.

The contrasting views of Robespierre, Kant and Sharp, through examining the French Revolution and the Carnation Revolution, demonstrate the duality of the role violence plays

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[25] Sharp, Gene. "From Dictatorship to Democracy." *The New Press*, January 31, 2012. https://thenewpress.com/books/from-dictatorship-democracy.
[26] Edelstein, Dan. Lecture to Revolutions class of Stanford Summer Humanities Institute, July 5, 2024.

in revolutions, contributing to either 'failure' or 'success'. In antiquity, violence was perceived by politicians like Robespierre to be fundamental for revolutionary success, inciting immense terror and death of the masses. However, in a modern light, violence is instead condemned by intellectuals like Kant and Sharp who instead advocate for the employment of non-violence in achieving revolutionary change. Ultimately, through the 'failure' of the ruthless French Revolution in contrast to the 'success' of the peaceful Carnation Revolution, violence proves to be a contributive but not critical asset to revolutionary success.

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20impractical%20because%20it,on%20hatred%20rather%20than%20love.

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