



Robespierre and the Reign of Terror

One of the more fascinating people to emerge from the French Revolution s Maximilien Robespierre. In the 1790s he rose to wield great power in the revolutionary government. As an extreme radical leftist, he was instrumental in instituting the **Reign of Terror**. This was a period where anyone who opposed Robespierre's idealism was judicially murdered, generally by use of the **guillotine**.

Maximilien François Marie Isidore de Robespierre was born 6 May 1758 in Arras. His father was a lawyer or as the French say *avocat*. Maximilien followed suit in 1781 after attending some impressive schools including a stint at the Lycee de Louis le Grande, for which he had a scholarship.

Like many great figures of the French Revolution, Robespierre was taken with the ideas of Jean Jacques Rousseau. He believed not only in the "rights of man", but that in his natural state man was virtuous. It had been the monarchy that corrupted humanity. Robespierre saw it as his life's work to institute a republican virtue into the government and people of France.

As a Deputy from Artois, he attended the *Estates-General* of 1789 in Paris as part of the Third Estate (the commoners). He was active in the **Jacobin Club**, which was a radical party espousing extreme measures of republican virtue. The Jacobins were closely aligned with the *sans coulottes* or the Paris mob, which influenced the successive revolutionary governments to more and more extreme measures.

He endeavored to lead an exemplary revolutionary life, and he was not shy about using his own life as an example in his speeches to indicate to other people how they ought to live. In the early days of the revolution when it was to his advantage, he advocated the right to peaceful assembly, and free speech. Later, when he led the Committee of Public Safety, he sent to the guillotine any one who dared speak out against him. As leader of the Jacobins and a vocal member of the Constituent Assembly (which took the place of the *Estates-General*) he became a popular figure.

In 1791 Robespierre founded his own newspaper, *In Defense of the Constitution*. He did not serve in the short-lived Legislative Assembly. He would return to the legislative branch in 1792 when yet another legislature was formed, this one called *The Convention*. Within the Convention, Robespierre became, if possible more radicalized. To handle the various emergencies of the Republic in the face of the deposition of the king and a draining war with

Prussia and Austria, several committees were formed. Robespierre was elected to lead the **Committee of Public Safety**.

Robespierre used his position on the committee to further his rigorous idealism and impose it remorselessly on the French Nation. He did this by instituting the **Reign of Terror**. Through his committee, his control of the Jacobin Club, and relations with the *sans coulottes* he executed or had murdered anyone who remotely opposed his policies. In the course of several purges, he destroyed even close compatriots such as **Danton**. It is estimated that more than 25,000 people were killed because of their political views. Many of them were put to death with no legal defense. Though many were scientifically executed using the guillotine, others were destroyed by firing squads, cannon fire, and even drowning *en masse*.

At the beginning of yet another round of purges in 1794, members of the Convention who thought they might be among his next targets, shouted him down as he got up to speak. He was accused of tyranny and arrested. Subject to the same procedures he had used against his political enemies, Robespierre was denied the right to self-defense. After a failed rescue attempt, Robespierre and more than 80 of his followers went to the Guillotine.

The end of Robespierre meant the end of the Reign of Terror. His death marks for many historians the end of the French Revolution.

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