

Excerpted from *Robespierre and the Terror* by Marisa Linton (2006)

Maximilien Robespierre has always provoked strong feelings. The French, for the most part, dislike his memory. There is no national monument to him, though many of the revolutionaries have had statues raised to them. Only one rather shabby metro station in a poorer suburb of Paris bears his name.

Although Robespierre, like most of the revolutionaries, was a bourgeois, he identified with the cause of the urban workers and became a spokesman for them. He came to dominate the Revolution in its most radical phase, which lasted from June 1793 to his overthrow in July 1794. This period is also known, more ominously, as the Terror.

Born in Arras in 1758, Robespierre suffered loss early in his life. His mother died when he was six, and soon after, his father abandoned the family. Maximilien was the eldest, a conscientious, hardworking boy who shouldered the burden of caring for his younger siblings. He became a lawyer best known for defending the poor. In 1789, when he was in his early thirties, the Revolution transformed his destiny. He was elected as a deputy for the Third Estate in the Estates General, and gained a reputation as a public speaker in the Assembly. He was a radical and a democrat, defending the idea that the 'rights of man' should extend to all men – including the poor and slaves in the colonies. He was also a vehement opponent of the death penalty. Why did he later change his mind and become an advocate of Terror?

From the spring of 1792 onwards France was involved in a spiral of war, revolt and civil war. Counter-revolutionaries were plotting the restoration of the absolute monarchy. In these circumstances, political views hardened, suspicion and fear increased, and the early optimism of the Revolution vanished. By the summer of 1792, The French army was on the verge of defeat and suffered from disorganization and raw and inexperienced troops. Many people thought that Louis was secretly on the side of the Austrian and Prussian armies, which were now threatening Paris. Many felt that Robespierre spoke for them when he declared that the aristocrats were plotting a conspiracy to destroy the Revolution. In August the monarchy was overthrown and a new government, the **National Convention**, was formed which declared France to be a republic.

When the Convention debated the fate of King Louis XVI, Robespierre believed that 'Louis must die in order for the Revolution to live'. Robespierre was coming to the conclusion that the ends justified the means, and that in order to defend the Revolution against those who would destroy it, the shedding of blood was justified.

The Jacobins had only a shaky legitimacy and innumerable opponents throughout France. Many people in France were already indifferent, if not openly hostile, to the Revolution. For many the Revolution now meant requisitioning of supplies, military conscription and the constant threat to their traditional ways of life, churches, and even time – for the revolutionaries had invented a new calendar.

In June 1793, a **Committee of Public Safety** was established to act as a war cabinet. It became the chief executive power, with Robespierre one of its twelve members. For the first time in history terror became an official government policy, with the stated aim to use violence in order to achieve a higher political goal. Unlike the later meaning of 'terrorists' as people who use violence against a government, the terrorists of the French Revolution *were* the government. The Terror was legal, having been voted for by the Convention. The number of death sentences in Paris was 2,639, while the number in the whole of France was 16,594. In the mind of Robespierre and many of his colleagues, the Terror had a deeper moral purpose beyond winning the civil war: to bring about a 'republic of virtue'. By this he meant a society in which people sought the happiness of their fellow humans rather than their own material benefit. France must be regenerated on moral lines. To establish this ideal republic one had to be prepared to eliminate opponents of the Revolution.

While in government Robespierre conducted his private life as a man of virtue. Far from living in palaces, Robespierre occupied simple rooms in the house of a master carpenter. He was known as 'the Incorruptible'

because he refused to use a public position for private gain and self-advancement. He lived simply on his deputy's salary. He walked everywhere, never taking a carriage. Yet the other side of this life was his role as the guiding hand of Terror. He used his political skills to achieve power. He could be accused of political ambition, but he did not see this as inconsistent with his dedication to the Revolution. He had an unshakable belief that his own aims coincided with what was best for the Revolution. He was a man of painful sincerity. He was not a hypocrite. He really believed that the Terror could sustain the republic of virtue.

While the Terror played a part in winning the war and quelling the counter-revolution, it also encouraged an atmosphere of duplicity, cynicism and fear, even among the Jacobins. Some of the victims of the last months of the Terror were Robespierre's former friends. **Camille Desmoulins**, Robespierre's friend from his schooldays, decided to support **Georges Danton**, another former friend of Robespierre, in his call that the Terror be wound down, and the power of the Committee of Public Safety broken. When the Committees decided to arrest Danton and Desmoulins, Robespierre used his personal knowledge of the two men to support the indictment against them. When Desmoulins' wife tried to agitate for his release, she was accused of conspiracy and followed her husband to the guillotine. A letter from her heart-broken mother to Robespierre, begging him to save her daughter, went unanswered. He believed that a man of virtue must put the good of the country before loyalty to his friends.

In the last few weeks of his life Robespierre shut himself in his rooms, and did not attend meetings. He was losing his grip, both on himself and on power. In his absence the executions intensified. There were aspects of the Terror with which Robespierre disagreed. For example, he was an opponent of De-Christianization. Robespierre was never the head of the government, nor the only terrorist: he was one man on the Committee. Other members of the Committee were as much responsible for the Terror. Some of his colleagues were hard, ambitious men, not averse to political corruption. Robespierre deplored the violent excesses of some of the Jacobin deputies who misused their powers to arrest, intimidate and execute local populations. Robespierre had some of these deputies in his sights when he finally returned to the Convention for the first time in more than four weeks.

It was the turning point. Robespierre demanded another purge of suspect deputies. In a fatal miscalculation, he failed to name these men. Not unnaturally, many of the fearful deputies thought he might mean them. 'The names!' they shouted. But he refused. His enemies among the Jacobins spent that night in organizing their conspiracy. Robespierre and his closest associates were arrested and they were executed the following day.

The men who overthrew Robespierre were more ruthless and cynical terrorists than he. Initially they wanted the Terror to continue. But it rapidly became clear that the public had sickened of it. Since the overwhelming victory over the, the military justification for it had also diminished. Many of these terrorist politicians rapidly restyled themselves, claiming that they had concerned themselves exclusively with the war and that it was only the Robespierrists who had been terrorists.

In the popular imagination Robespierre the enigma rapidly became the embodiment of the Terror. Yet he would never have been so influential had he not spoken for a large number of people in society and government. When he spoke of conspiracies against the Revolution, and the need for extreme measures, he voiced the fears of many at that time that France was about to be overwhelmed by foreign and internal enemies. The policies of the Jacobin Committees had, after all, been endorsed by the deputies of the Convention. Perhaps this is why he has been so vilified: by holding one individual culpable [responsible] for the ills of the Terror, French society was able to avoid looking into its own dark heart at that traumatic moment. *Robespierre, you might say, "took the rap".*