

Louis Antoine Léon de Saint-Just (1767-1794)



Louis Antoine Léon de Saint-Just (1767-1794), a radical political leader during the French Revolution, was a member of the ruling Jacobin group in Paris during the Reign of Terror.

Louis de Saint-Just was born on Aug. 25, 1767, in Decize, the son of an army officer. After a period of schooling, he ran away from home to Paris, taking with him part of the family silver. He studied law for a time and also published a burlesque epic which was a mixture of the crudely erotic and of sharp criticism of the government and society of his day.

When the Revolution broke out in 1789, the youthful Saint-Just gave it his enthusiastic support, and he published in 1791 *The Spirit of the Revolution and of the Constitution of France*. He was too young to be elected to the Legislative Assembly that year, but in September 1792 he was elected a member of the Convention, whose task it was, now that the King had been deposed, to draft a new constitution and to govern France in the meantime. Saint-Just, handsome, proud, and self-possessed, spoke with the zeal of a dedicated revolutionist. He ruthlessly and brilliantly urged the trial and execution of the King; he participated actively in drafting the Constitution of 1793; and in the feverish atmosphere of foreign and civil war, he became the spokesman for the Jacobins in demanding the death of their moderate opponents, the Girondins.

In June 1793 Saint-Just became a member of the Committee of Public Safety, the executive body that ruled France in dictatorial fashion, using the so-called Reign of Terror as a means of repressing opposition. In October he was sent as a

representative to the Army of the Rhine in Strasbourg, where the war was going badly and factionalism and opposition to the government in Paris were at their height. He was twice sent on similar missions to the Army of the North.

Back in Paris, Saint-Just defended the Terror in speeches and proposed a redistribution of the property of the disloyal rich, a plan that was never implemented. As spokesman for the Robespierriest faction, he denounced the extremist Hébertists; he also denounced Georges Jacques Danton and the Indulgents; and each time the objects of his scorn were sent to the guillotine.

Although a determined terrorist, Saint-Just was also an idealist. His unpublished *Fragments concerning Republican Institutions* reveals his Rousseauistic and Spartan utopianism. He and Robespierre were determined to fashion a new France, a "Republic of Virtue," and for that goal the continuation of the Terror was essential. But a moderate trend had begun, prompted in part by the military victory of Fleurus, to which Saint-Just had contributed during his last mission to the army. For this and other reasons, a fatal split took place.

Saint-Just prepared a report denouncing his and Robespierre's opponents, to be delivered to the Convention on July 27, 1794. But he was interrupted by the opposition, and he, Robespierre, and their colleagues were arrested. Released by their supporters, they gathered at the city hall, hoping to prevail over their enemies with the aid of the Parisian populace. But shortly after midnight they were captured and executed. Saint-Just's youthful beauty and his terrible virtue have earned him the sobriquet of "archangel of the Revolution."

Further Reading on Louis Antoine Léon de Saint-Just

The most comprehensive and best biography, although sometimes unnecessarily detailed, is Eugene Newton Curtis, *Saint-Just: Colleague of Robespierre* (1935). A short and perceptive study is Geoffrey Bruun, *Saint-Just: Apostle of the Terror* (1932). Both studies are reasonably objective in their estimate of the man. Saint-Just's role as a member of the Committee of Public Safety is described in the excellent history of that organization by R. R. Palmer, *Twelve Who Ruled* (1941).

Additional Biography Sources

Hampson, Norman, *Saint-Just*, Oxford, UK; Cambridge, Mass., USA: Blackwell, 1991.

Mazzucchelli, Mario, *Saint-Just*, Milano: Dall'Oglio, 1980.

Vinot, Bernard, *Saint-Just*, Paris: Fayard, 1985.