

The History Guide

Lectures on Modern European Intellectual History

Maximilien Robespierre, 1758-1794



Maximilien Marie Isidore de Robespierre was born, of Irish origin, at Arras, May 6, 1758. He was admitted *avocat* in 1781, and was elected to the Estates General in 1789 by Artois. He attached himself to the extreme left wing, and soon commanded attention. His influence grew daily, and the mob frantically admired his earnest cant and his boasted incorruptibility.

In 1791 he carried the motion that no member of the present Assembly should be eligible for the next, and was appointed public accuser. Next followed the flight to Varennes (June 21), Lafayette's last effort to control the right of insurrection on the Champ-de-Mars (July 17), the abject terror of Robespierre, his hysterical appeal to the Club, the theatrical oath taken by every member to defend his life, and his conduct home in triumph by the mob at the close of the Constituent Assembly (September 30). The Girondist leaders in the new

Legislative Assembly were eager for war. Robespierre offered a strenuous opposition in the Jacobin Club.

In April 1792 he resigned his post of public accuser. In August he presented to the Legislative Assembly a petition for a Revolutionary Tribunal and a new Convention. It does not appear that he was in any way responsible for the September massacres. He was elected first deputy for Paris to the national Convention, where the bitter attacks upon him by the Girondists threw him into closer union with Danton.

Robespierre vigorously opposed the Girondist idea of a special appeal to the people on the king's death, and Louis's execution on January 21, 1793, opened up the final stages of the struggle, which ended in a complete triumph of the Jacobins on June 2.

The first Committee of Public Safety was decreed in April 1793, and Robespierre, elected in July, was now one of the actual rulers of France (along with the rest of the Twelve). Next came the dark intrigues and desperate struggles that sent Hébert and his friends to the guillotine in March 1794, and Danton and Camille Desmoulins in April. The next three months Robespierre reigned supreme. he nominated all the members of the Government Committees, placed his men in all places of influence in the commune of Paris, and assumed complete control of the Revolutionary Tribunal.

However, as his power increased, his popularity waned. On May 7 Robespierre, who had previously condemned the Cult of Reason, advocated a new state religion and recommended the Convention to acknowledge the existence of God; on June 8 the inaugural Festival of the Supreme being took place. Meanwhile, the pace of the guillotine grew faster; public finance and government generally drifted to ruin, and Saint-Just demanded the creation of a dictatorship in the person of Robespierre. On July 26, the dictator delivered a long harangue complaining that he was being accused of crimes unjustly. The Convention, after at first obediently passing his decrees, next rescinded them and referred his proposals to the committees. That night at the Jacobin Club his party again triumphed. At the Convention the following day, Saint-Just could not obtain a hearing, and Robespierre was vehemently attacked (the 9th of Thermidor). A deputy proposed his arrest; at the fatal word Robespierre's power came to an end.

He fled to the Common Hall, whereupon the Convention declared him an outlaw. The National Guard under Barras turned out to protect the Convention, and Robespierre had his lower jaw broken by a shot fired by a gendarme. The next day (July 28, the 10th of Thermidor), he was sent to the guillotine along with Saint-Just, Couthon, and nineteen others.

For a provocative account of Robespierre, please see Norman Hampson's, *The Life and Opinions of Maximilien Robespierre* (London: Duckworth, 1974).

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