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World History

Mr. Hamilton

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### Robespierre: Monster or Savior?

The Reign of Terror was the most radical phase of the French Revolution; beginning after Maximilien Robespierre's election to the Committee of Public Safety in 1793 and ending with Robespierre's death on July 27, 1794 ("Reign"). By the time the Reign of Terror ended, 300,000 suspects had been arrested, 17,000 had been executed, and even more died in prison or waiting for a trial. Maximilien Robespierre is usually handed the blame for this radical phase of the revolution, but is he really the one to hold responsible? Robespierre is responsible for the Reign of Terror because his beliefs led him to take radical measures during the French Revolution. However, his intentions were not to slaughter thousands of people. The Reign of Terror was simply the price that had to be paid for freedom.

Maximilien Robespierre was born Maximilien-François-Marie-Isidore de Robespierre in the French town of Arras on May 6, 1758. When Robespierre's mother died during childbirth, his father left Robespierre and his three siblings to be raised by their grandfather and aunts. Robespierre's childhood was unstable and far from happy, but he was an intelligent boy. He studied law in Paris, where he first came across Jean-Jacques Rousseau's principles. Robespierre was specifically interested in Rousseau's principles of democracy

and deism, and he eventually developed his own definition of virtue. Robespierre's definition of virtue was civic morality, and he believed that any society could be reformed. Robespierre became a strong supporter of the Third Estate and joined the radical Jacobin Club in 1789. After King Louis XVI's execution, Robespierre was elected to the Committee of Public Safety ("Maximilien"). Although there is not a specific date for when the moderation turned to radicalism, the date is often said to be July 27, 1793, the day Robespierre was elected to the Committee of Public Safety.

The Committee of Public Safety was originally created to control any extremes in the executive branch of the government, but it quickly grew, pushing aside any government except its own ("Maximilien"). On September 22, 1793, the Committee of Public Safety abolished the monarchy and founded the First Republic. By the end of September, the government was centered on the Committee. The Committee of Public Safety took many measures to reform the nation. Maximum prices were set for many goods, a revolutionary army was created, and a Law of Suspects was passed to constitute standards to determine disloyalty. On December 4, 1793, a decree was passed that channeled even more power to the central government and the Committee of Public Safety. In June 1794, the Reign of Terror was in full swing. A decree was passed at this time in the Committee to expand the number of people considered public enemies. Legal counsel was denied, witnesses were only allowed in certain occasions, and death was the only penalty allowed to those found guilty (Banfield 120). The Committee of Public Safety passed many decrees and laws that made helped define the Reign of Terror. Although the responsibility lies on Robespierre because he was the head of the Committee of Public Safety, there are many other people to accuse.

Robespierre is ultimately responsible for the Reign of Terror, but many others also had an influence on the events that occurred between 1793 and 1794. There were many instances where the citizens had an increasingly large say on what was going on in France. At the beginning of the Reign of Terror, many people were dissatisfied with France's current government, The National Convention. Citizens accused the government of being too negligent with treasonous officers and traitors. After Marat's assassination on July 13, 1793, the people demanded, once again, that the government deal with the treachery in France. The Committee of Public Safety responded to this demand by creating a new constitution, providing a list of traitors to be arrested, and enforcing a *leveé en masse*, or mass draft, to deal with the struggling military situation. Despite these actions by the Committee of Public Safety, the citizens of France still demanded more and blamed the National Convention and the Committee of Public Safety for not doing enough (Banfield 134). If the Committee of Public Safety, and Robespierre at its head, had not faced so many demands from the people of France, Robespierre may not have enacted such radical measures. Much of the blame for the Reign of Terror is placed on Robespierre because he was the head of the Committee of Public Safety, and the Committee was responsible for many of the measures forced upon the French. A portion of the blame must also lie on the Committee of Public Safety. Saint-Just, for example, was another revolutionary leader that worked closely with Robespierre in the Committee of Public Safety. He believed that the government "must punish whoever is passive in the Republic" and "rule by iron those who cannot be ruled by justice" (Banfield 159). Saint-Just was a strong supporter of the Revolution and carrying it out to its full extent. Although some of the blame does lie with Saint-Just and others who held similar beliefs in

the Committee of Public Safety, Robespierre was the head of the Committee, and therefore the blame must ultimately fall on him.

Maximilien Robespierre believed in saving the revolution. He looked past the “now” and was able to see a better “then.” His intentions were not to murder thousands of people, but to rescue the depleted military situation and to turn the country of France into a “republic of virtue.” Austrians were invading from the North while the Spanish were preparing to invade from the South (Thompson 103). Robespierre wished to rally and defend the nation from these inevitable invasions. This was also the perfect time for Robespierre to implement the reform he wished would be enacted in every society. In Robespierre’s mind, a “republic of virtue” meant no more poverty, freedom to French slaves, and control over education (Banfield 166). The republic Robespierre wished to create also meant that the laws, customs, and morals common during the ancien régime needed to be changed (Jordan 89). He believed that the Revolution needed to be fought until the end and he refused to compromise his principles; this made him very popular with the common people of the Third Estate. Although Robespierre “was the sworn foe of every kind of oppression,” he carried many of his beliefs to an extreme (Jordan 92). While he believed that his republic could be carried out through peaceful means, he was willing to use any means to make sure that the change took place (“Maximilien”). The 17,000 who were executed via guillotine were simply a sacrifice to make sure France was safe from invasion and that the “republic of virtue” Robespierre envisioned could be achieved.

Robespierre had many qualities and beliefs that led him to do many of the things that made the Reign of Terror so horrible. Robespierre is known to be a righteous man; one who

was able to avoid the pleasures and attractions that corrupted so many officials during the French Revolution. He spoke with sincerity (Banfield 131) and he provided explanations and justifications for his actions. By comparing his life to others, he was able to make himself appear moral and principled (Jordan 56). Robespierre's "moral pedantry" was vital to his success. However, this moral and righteous man seems to be the opposite of the man responsible for so many deaths in such a short period of time. Robespierre's hypocritical nature is seen with his beliefs and his actions. While Robespierre was the voice of reason, equality, and liberty, he was also the voice of rage, despair, and fury. As a fundamental supporter of the Third Estate, Robespierre had a close connection to the people. This love of the people, however, could easily be confused with a love of self. "He seemed to revel not just in being virtuous for virtue's sake, but in being more virtuous than his fellows." (Banfield 148). Did Robespierre have a true love of the people, or was it simply a show to appear better than his opponents?

How...could anyone who admitted to being unnerved by seeing human misery, yet who authorized the mass slaughter of thousands, be sincere about loving the people? (Banfield 148).

Robespierre was known to be uncomfortable in the presence of others, so it is improbable that he was able to have a close connection with a large number of people. If Robespierre was a true friend of the people, it is unlikely that he would be able to sit back and watch as thousands of people were executed. What Robespierre claimed to believe and what Robespierre actually implemented in real life were entirely different things. It is believable that many of those executed during the Reign of Terror would be nobility, because the French Revolution was a revolution against the nobility, but in reality over three-fourths of

those executed were members of the Third Estate. Robespierre showed no mercy for those people that he claimed to represent only months earlier. His harsh and bloody actions were completely opposite of what a true man of “moral pedantry” would do.

Before and during the Reign of Terror, Robespierre did many things that were unsettling to the citizens of France. One major movement that Robespierre has become infamous for is the de-Christianization movement. By proposing an entirely new calendar with a ten-day week, Sunday, the holy day, was eliminated. If a citizen were able to figure out what day to go to church, he would most likely find the church closed. Robespierre hoped that people would replace their devotion to the church with a devotion to the state and the government (Banfield 134). The de-Christianization movement, headed by Robespierre, was an intentional act to increase loyalty to the government. Robespierre also angered many people by his hypocrisy. The guillotine was the most popular way of execution during the Reign of Terror, and overall 17,000 people were killed by its blade (“Reign”). Robespierre was a strong believer in ridding France of those guilty of treason, and therefore a strong supporter of the guillotine. Robespierre himself, however, witnessed no executions. He believed that a public execution “coarsened and brutalized” the people (Hibbert 76). However, Robespierre and the Committee of Public Safety continued to pass laws expanding the number of people considered public enemies. Towards the end of the Reign of Terror, Robespierre began to realize that his plans to save France were only hurting the country more. Yet Robespierre refused to negotiate or discuss his principles. Perhaps it was his determination to save the country, or maybe his devotion to his principles, either way, Robespierre refused to give in. Robespierre eventually stopped attending Committee

meetings as unrest grew among Committee members and the public (Hibbert 92). By the time he was arrested and guillotined on July 28, 1794, Robespierre had gained much dislike by all levels of society. Robespierre's actions as a strong supporter of the de-Christianization movement and the guillotine require a majority of the blame to lie with him. The differences between his character and his actions angered many people; making him a reliable scapegoat for all of the horror during the Reign of Terror.

It is plausible to believe that there are others truly responsible for the Reign of Terror besides Robespierre, but being such a prominent figure in the Committee of Public Safety, he gets held accountable. In truth, however, Robespierre is the one to blame. There are others who had some say in what happened between July 1793 and July 1794, but none held as much responsibility, or acted as harsh and brutal as Robespierre did. A revolution is meant to be a change in government, but the radical phase of the revolution that was the Reign of Terror completely overturned and transformed every aspect of life, and Robespierre is to blame for that. Shortly before his execution, Robespierre asked for the use of pen and paper (Banfield 150). Did he apologize for what he had done, or did he stay loyal to his apparent beliefs, and condemn his executioners? Robespierre was denied the use of writing utensils, so no one will ever know what Robespierre's last words would have been.

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