Maximilien Robespierre biography
Reign of Terror - French Revolution

Maximilien Robespierre (Maximilien François Marie Isidore de Robespierre) was born on May 6th, 1758, in Arras where his father was based as an advocate. Robespierre and his three younger siblings were brought up by diverse relatives after their father dramatically lost his way in life after the death of his wife in childbirth in 1767. Robespierre was educated for a short time at a College in Arras and then in Paris initially at the very prestigious College of Louis-le-Grand and later at the College of Law.

Robespierre qualified as an advocate in 1781 and sought to establish a legal practice at his home town of Arras. He became known both as a successful advocate and as a participant in local literary and philosophic circles. He was elected as a "Third Estate" (i.e. a Commoner rather than an Aristocratic or Clerical) deputy of Artois to the Estates-General that convened at the Palace of Versailles, on May 5th 1789, on the eve of the French Revolution, and subsequently served in the National Constituent Assembly, where his earnest and skillful oratory soon commanded attention.

As he had grown into manhood Robespierre had become a fanatical devotee of the social theories of the French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau. He and some thirty other like-minded deputies became associated in a "Society of the Friends of the Constitution" later known as the Jacobin Club. In April 1790 he was elected president of the Jacobin Club and became increasingly popular as an enemy of the monarchy and as an advocate of democratic reforms. When the Constituent Assembly was dissolved on September 30th 1791 Robespierre and another prominent Jacobin Petion de Villeneuve were the only outgoing deputies recognized as "incorruptible patriots" by the more radically inclined amongst the people of Paris. Robespierre "The Incorruptible" subsequently opposed the more moderate Girondists, the dominant faction in the newly formed Legislative Assembly, particularly over their support for war with Austria.

In June 1791 King Louis XVI and Queen Marie-Antoinette attempted to flee from France in order to seek refuge with powers opposed to the revolution - they were however recognized and detained at Varennes. Robespierre had hitherto been content with the sort of constitutional monarchy that had been in operation in France. The King’s attempted defection altered the way he was perceived by Robespierre and others.

In late August 1792 France was threatened with invasion by a mixed Austrian, Prussian, and French émigré force. The leader of this force, the Duke of Brunswick, issued the so-called "Brunswick Manifesto" which threatened all Frenchmen with dire punishment if they defended themselves against the advance of Brunswick's forces and threatened to lay waste to Paris if the French royal family were harmed. Given that King Louis XVI was suspect since his abortive "flight to Varennes" there was a move led by Danton and others for the overthrow of the French monarchy. The palace of Tuileries was stormed and the royal family was arrested after seeking refuge with the assembly.

On September 21st a recently elected new assembly that called itself the Convention declared that the French monarchy was abolished and France was a Republic. On September 25th the Convention proclaimed that the "French Republic is one and indivisible".

Robespierre spoke at King Louis XVI's trial as follows:-

"You have not to pass sentence for or against a single man, but you have to take a resolution on a question of the public safety, and to decide a question of national foresight. It is with regret that I
pronounce a fatal truth: Louis ought to perish rather than a hundred thousand virtuous citizens; Louis must die that the country may live."

Citizen Louis Capet (formerly known as King Louis XVI) was subsequently sent to the guillotine on 21st January 1793.

Girondin led France had little success in conflicts with foreign adversaries. There was an open "royalist" revolt against the central authority in the Vendée and there were demands for greater 'federalist' autonomy expressed by interests in southern regions of France.

Over the last days of May and first days of June 1793, Robespierre, supported by the Commune of Paris, forced the expulsion of the Girondists from the National Convention. On July 27th he was elected a member of the chief executive body, the Committee of Public Safety. Although Robespierre was from one point of view only one of twelve members of the committee he was the only one who, through the full support he enjoyed from the Jacobin Clubs and the Commune of Paris, represented a close link to the more radical supporters of the Revolution.

France was in turmoil, and with the aim of restoring order and reducing the danger of invasion from abroad, Robespierre, backed by the committee, proceeded to ruthlessly eliminate all whom he considered to be enemies of the Revolution, both extremists and moderates. This policy led to the so-called Reign of Terror and to the execution of the revolutionary leaders Jacques René Hébert (March 24th 1794) and Georges Jacques Danton (April 6th 1794). Both Hébert and Danton were politicians whose preferred policies were inconsistent with the pure Rousseauism that was Robespierre's guiding principle. The Hébertists had been suspected of preparing for a coup d'état and this may have contributed to the harshness with which they were treated. Danton was one of several prominent persons who were suspected of financial corruption thus polluting the virtue of the Revolution. Whilst the aims of the Terror were perhaps laudable from Robespierre's revolutionary perspective the means adopted towards those ends were terrible indeed.

On May 7th, at Robespierre's insistence, the National Convention proclaimed as an official religion the Cult of the Supreme Being, which was based on Rousseau's theory of Deism. This decree antagonized both Roman Catholics and atheists, but Robespierre still had the powerful backing of the Commune of Paris. A Grand Fête in honor of the Supreme Being was celebrated on 8th June 1794 where Robespierre, who had been elected as the President of the Convention four days previously, played a major role.

Whatever appearance of justice the revolutionary tribunals that had been set up to investigate people's political loyalties may have had prior to these times a law of June 10th 1794 established a situation where witnesses could no longer be called for the defense and where such tribunals effectively became committees of condemnation. Between June 12th and July 28th almost 1300 people were sent to the Guillotine (an average of 28 beheadings a day).

This intensification of the Reign of Terror, caused many influential members of the Convention and of the Jacobin Club to fear for their own safety. In recent months French military fortunes had been transformed largely as a result of a mass levy of all unmarried men between the ages of 18 and 25 that had been authorized by the Convention on 23rd August 1793. A series of significant French military victories that were reported from diverse battlefields made the extreme security measures that had been followed seem less imperative, and a conspiracy was formed for the overthrow of Robespierre.
On July 27th 1794 Robespierre was accused of tyranny, barred from speaking at the National Convention, and was placed under arrest as were several key supporters. Although these captives were promptly rescued by soldiers loyal to the Commune of Paris and brought to the Hôtel de Ville the Convention ordered the National Guard to move to recapture Robespierre who subsequently received a gunshot wound to the lower jaw during his recapture.

On July 28th Robespierre together with his closest associates Louis Saint-Just and Georges Couthon and nineteen other supporters died on the guillotine.
Eighty more followers of Robespierre were executed the next day.

Thus perished a man who had been a successful, popular, and cultured provincial lawyer but who gained power in turbulent times and was able to pursue certain unproven social theories with a singleness of mind that could tolerate grievous human suffering if it was perceived as 'necessary' to the realization and defense of a theoretically ideal society.

With the demise of Robespierre the truly Revolutionary phase of the Revolution in France more or less came to an end. Power shifted away from the radicals and towards the conservatives. The Jacobin Clubs were closed down in November and freedom of worship was restored in February 1795.
Answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper in complete sentences

1. What schools did Robespierre attend?
2. What happened in 1781?
3. What was he elected as in the Third Estate?
4. What did the “Society of Friends of the Constitution” later become known as?
5. After Robespierre was elected president of the Jacobin Club what did he become increasingly popular as?
6. Who were the “incorruptible patriots”?
7. Who did Robespierre “The Incorruptible” oppose and why?
8. What was the result of the King and Queen’s attempt to flee on the way Robespierre and others thought of the king?
9. Who threatened to invade France in 1792?
10. What was the “Brunswick Manifesto”?
11. What did the movement by Danton want to do?
12. What happened on September 21st?
13. What did the Convention proclaim on Sept. 25th?
14. According to Robespierre in his speech at the trial of Louis XVI why must Louis die?
15. What happen on January 21st 1793?
16. In what ways were the Girondin not successful?
17. What happened on June 1, 1793?
18. What was he elected on July 27th?
19. In the Committee of Public Safety Robespierre was the only one that had what?
20. In order to restore order and reduce the danger of invasions who did Robespierre and the committee eliminate?
21. Which revolutionary leaders did they execute?
22. What was the Cult of the Supreme Being based on?
23. What happened on June 10th 1794?
24. Between June 12th and July 28th how many people were guillotined and what does this break down to per day?
25. What affect did the intensification of the Reign of Terror have?
26. What were the results of the French military victories?
27. What was Robespierre accused of?
28. How did he receive the gunshot wound in the lower jaw?
29. What happened in July 28th?
30. How many of his supporters died the next day?
31. What was the result of the demise of Robespierre?