

Famous Portraits Series

Maximilien Robespierre

One of the Leaders of the French Revolution

Born: 6 May 1758 Died: 29 July 1794 (Aged 36)

Issue 14



1. Maximilien Robespierre as a law student in 1776 (aged 18)
Painting by J. Boze



2. Robespierre as Deputy of the Third Estate in 1790 (aged 32)
Painting by Pierre Roche Vigneron, Palace of Versailles



3. Robespierre as Leader of the Jacobin faction, 1792, (aged 34)
Anonymous painting, Carnvalet Museum



4. Robespierre during the Reign of Terror in 1794 (aged 35)
Painting by Louis-Léopold Boilly, Palais des Beaux Arts de Lille



5. Death mask of Robespierre executed on 29 July 1794
Photo taken in 1914.
Details were added to make him appear the way he looked when he was guillotined.



6. Digital reconstruction of Robespierre's face by Philippe Froesch's Visual Forensic Laboratory, Barcelona and Philippe Charlier from the University of Versailles-St Quentin, France

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Image Sources:

- [1. http://rodama1789.blogspot.com/2017/09/checklist-of-robepierre-portraits-set-1.html](http://rodama1789.blogspot.com/2017/09/checklist-of-robepierre-portraits-set-1.html)
- [2. https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Maximilien_Robespierre#Media/File:Maximilien_de_Robespierre_by_Ad%C3%A9la%C3%AFde_Labille-Guiard.png](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Maximilien_Robespierre#Media/File:Maximilien_de_Robespierre_by_Ad%C3%A9la%C3%AFde_Labille-Guiard.png)
- [3. https://www.britannica.com/biography/Maximilien-Robespierre](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Maximilien-Robespierre)
- [4. https://crozieronstuff.com/robepierre](https://crozieronstuff.com/robepierre)
- [5. https://scroller.com/the-death-mask-of-maximilien-robepierre-1758-94in92whc5](https://scroller.com/the-death-mask-of-maximilien-robepierre-1758-94in92whc5)
- [6. https://revolutioninfiction.wordpress.com/2014/03/15/making-medical-myths-the-case-of-maximilien-robepierre-by-peter-mcphoe/](https://revolutioninfiction.wordpress.com/2014/03/15/making-medical-myths-the-case-of-maximilien-robepierre-by-peter-mcphoe/)

Maximilien Marie Isidore de Robespierre was born in Arras, France. He came from a middle-class family, the eldest of four children. He was brought up by his grandparents after his mother's death. Robespierre followed his father's footsteps and became a lawyer after studying law at the Sorbonne.

Whilst at university, he studied the Roman Republic and its' great orators. This knowledge kindled his political aspirations. He was also inspired by the works of the Enlightened philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau. He built upon Rousseau's concepts of revolutionary virtue and direct democracy and developed the concept of the 'general will'. According to him, the will of the people was a key basis for political legitimacy.

When King Louis XVI summoned the Estates General to meet in May 1789, Robespierre saw this as an opportunity for major reforms. He began advocating the idea that new methods of election to the Estates General should be implemented for better representation of the people. In May 1789 he was elected as one of the members of the Third Estate. With his speeches Robespierre soon drew the attention of many deputies.

Robespierre then joined the Jacobin faction and in 1790 he was elected president of this movement. He became known for his heated speeches and obstinate viewpoints. He favoured a meritocratic society, where men could take office on the basis of their skills and talents rather than on their social status. He wanted to spread the appeal of the revolution to reach as many people as possible. Robespierre described himself as defender of the rights of men. He had staunch ideas on how France should be governed.

He was one of the Jacobin leaders who clamoured for the execution of the King following the royal family's attempted flight to Varennes. His talent in oracy and persuasive skills managed to convince the jurors to condemn Louis to death. With the establishment of the Republic, Robespierre led of the Committee of Public Safety as France's provisional government. The Committee was entrusted with the protection of the new republic from both external and internal enemies. Robespierre signed over 500 death warrants against anyone who was not showing enough support for the Revolution when the Law of Suspects was enacted by the Convention. This period in France became known as the Reign of Terror when Robespierre governed France as a tyrant. In this role, he did his best to root out all opposition against the Revolution. However, it was thanks to his strong arguments against slavery that this was banned by a decree of the National Convention in 1793.

Notwithstanding his initial popularity and his fame for incorruptibility, eventually Robespierre came to be regarded by many as a threat and a liability to that same Revolution which he so staunchly sought to defend. With his increasing uncompromising stance and tyrannical attitude no one was safe – not even his closest supporters. Anyone not careful enough in speech or behaviour could end up to the guillotine.

In the end his staunch support of the Terror backfired when a coup against him was organized within the Convention itself. When an arrest warrant was issued against him, he tried to escape but failed. He was arrested, condemned to death and guillotined in a matter of hours. It was reported by eyewitnesses, that people present during his execution kept cheering for fifteen minutes! One historian stated that with his execution, the voice of the Revolution was finally silenced.

Further reading

https://www.ducksters.com/history/french_revolution/robespierre.php

https://kids.kiddle.co/Maximilien_de_Robespierre

Questions

1. Which of Maximilien Robespierre's early experiences and influences shaped his later political beliefs and convictions?
2. How did Robespierre's role in the National Convention and the Jacobin Club contribute to his rise to power during the French Revolution?
3. How was the Committee of Public Safety used as an instrument of power by Robespierre?
4. Why did Robespierre justify the use of violence during the Reign of Terror?
5. How did Robespierre's increasing power and influence affect his relationships with other revolutionary figures, both supporters and opponents?
6. What were the main reasons behind the sudden downfall of Robespierre?
7. What is the historical legacy of Robespierre's role in the French Revolution?
8. Mention TWO positive and TWO negative attributes about Robespierre's character and personality.