

# Robespierre – evil or virtuous?

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Robespierre: Evil or Virtuous? “ Virtue, without which terror is destructive; terror, without which virtue is impotent” (Zizek). Maximilien Robespierre said this in a speech when people were starting to question his judgment. He believed that to be only virtuous was difficult, and without some terror added in, the world would go into turmoil as no one would follow their leader. A leader has to be strong and forceful, and sometimes even terrifying to get their point across, or to get people to follow them.

Robespierre always wanted what was best for France and was willing to do anything to get it, even if that meant causing harm to the people of France. He felt that as long as the outcome of his hard work came with the results he wanted, anything he did was justified. Despite all the horror of the Reign of Terror, Maximilien Robespierre was a virtuous man. He not only reacted to the problems in France with determination, but he created a clear program to help France in this troubled time. He also was the leader of many committees and he established many laws to further the French Revolution.

Even when some of the people of France started to turn against him, he produced a program to help them, not to harm them. Robespierre always had France’s best interests at heart. He never wanted to have to use terror as a means of moving the French Revolution forwards, but he believed it had to happen for the better of France. He was a virtuous man from the beginning right up until the end and for that, he will be well remembered. In 1788, France was in turmoil and panic. France was going bankrupt and King Louis had to deal with disaster after disaster. The coldest winter in the history of France in seventy-nine years fell upon the nation.

The price of bread almost doubled, the peasantry began to starve, and famine threatened whole sections of the population. By the end of 1788, Louis XVI received over eight hundred petitions demanding that the Commons, the Third Estate, have as many votes as the clergy and nobility combined in the Estates-General (Blumberg 291). By late November, King Louis became desperate and issued a proclamation convening the Estates-General for the following May, showing that already he was losing power over his people. Robespierre was elected as one of the twenty-four representatives of the Third Estate for Arras.

He came in with a calm determination to fix everything and began to make his mark in history. As soon as the summoning of the Estates-General was proclaimed, Robespierre conceived the idea of seeking election. Unlike others who claimed to speak to the whole of France, he thought it better to deal with local matters, thus providing the people with issues of more immediate interest. Robespierre believed that the Estates were not representative since they were “constituted of a league of a few citizens who had seized power which belongs only to the people” (Matrat 43).

He thought that the First Estate held their seats only by virtue of their rank, and not by election and did not believe that this was fair. “By what right have they excluded the cures, the class that is without contradiction the most numerous; the most useful of this body; the most valuable because of the close relationship which binds it to the needs and interests of the people” (Matrat 43)? Robespierre went on to consider the composition of the Second Estate and found it no more representative. As for the Third Estate, he stressed that they represented neither the townspeople nor the country folk.

Robespierre also protested strongly against forced labour among the farmers of Hainaut, which brought him the favour of these people as well as respect from many others. Robespierre was also in the National Assembly and was trying his hardest to restore the rights of man to his country. During these years, he earned a reputation for integrity and developed eloquence in his speeches that drew increasing attention from the Assembly. Robespierre proposed the self-denying law which made all the delegates to the first Assembly of 1789 ineligible for the second in 1791 and he also argued that liberty could not be spread by force.

The Royal Family of France's attempted escape on June 20th, 1791 made many people very unhappy with the King. The mob, ever ready to exercise the uncontrolled Rights of Men, made a mock parade of the King's Arms in the market places, and, dashing them and the figure of a crown to the ground, they trampled upon them, crying out, " Since the King has abandoned what he owed to his high situation, let us trample upon the ensigns of royalty" (Ascherson 48)! The Royal Family not only lost many of its followers through their attempted escape, but also because King Louis XVI kept making bad decisions, ones that had no benefit to France or its people.

The people wanted someone who would lead them into a revolution and change France for the better, not because they wanted the power, but because they believed in France and wanted it to become a great nation. That man was Robespierre, who after the flight of the King followed the Jacobin club in its move toward republicanism. He called for universal male suffrage and the end of property qualifications for voting and office holding (Blumberg 290). Robespierre wanted to make France a republic, a

government for the people and by the people, a country where everyone had the freedoms and rights they deserved.

In January of 1793, Robespierre voted on whether or not he thought that King Louis should be executed for his actions. At the Convention on the trial of the King, he looked towards the judges and stated; Because you have established yourselves the judge of Louis, without the usual forms, are you less his judges? You cannot separate your quality of Judge from that of Legislator. These two qualities are indivisible. You have acknowledged the crimes of the tyrant. It is your duty to punish them. No consideration should make you hesitate respecting the punishment reserved for the greatest criminal that ever existed.

I vote for the punishment of death (Ascherson 84). Robespierre led the beginning of other members of the Assembly leaders voting for the Kings death. Out of a total of seven hundred and forty-five members, three hundred and sixty-six voted for King Louis death that was carried out on January 25th, 1793 (Ascherson 86-7). After the Kings death, Robespierre stood up as the leader of France and the Jacobins and began his attempts to make France the nation he hoped it would someday become. Robespierre accomplished much, establishing many committees and laws to further the French Revolution.

The Declaration of the Rights of Man proclaimed freedom, propriety, the safety of the individual, resistance to oppression, the sovereignty of the nation, the participation of all citizens in the drawing up of laws, and the admission of all to situations and honours, with no other distinction than that of their virtues and their talents (Kreis). Robespierre believed in the <https://assignbuster.com/robespierre-evil-or-virtuous/>

Declaration and was against the establishment of any censorship. There ought to be no compromise in the matter. The freedom of the press ought to be established without any reservation.

Free men cannot set out their rights in equivocal terms. Freedom of the press is the corollary of freedom of speech. In a free state each citizen is a guardian of freedom, who must shout at the smallest rumour, and at the least sight of any danger which threatens it (Matrat 67). Robespierre argued his beliefs and his dreams not only for himself, but for those people who did not have a voice. He argued for the people of France. Through newspapers and word of mouth, Robespierre became known as one of the most diligent defenders of the people.

He made many speeches and put forth many proposals in the National Assembly that spoke on the changes he wanted to make in France. One such proposal was to create a tribunal made up of members of the Assembly who would be concerned with “plots and conspiracies against the people and freedom” (Matrat 79). Then the people, certain of the punishment of its enemies, would feel reassured and would calm down. When Robespierre was elected as the president of the Jacobins in March of 1790 he reacted with determination and a clear program.

The nation had to mobilize all its resources for the war against Austria, draft every available man, ration food, fix prices and wages, weed out opposition at home, punish slackers, speculators, and food hoarders, and suspend due process of law to accelerate the arrests of counterrevolutionaries (Blumberg 291). In April on 1793, the Committee of Public Safety replaced the Committee for General Defence with nine members. The Committee of Public

Safety formed to keep chaos from reigning over France as counter-revolutionaries rebelled against the new French government.

Soon after the Committee was established, the Convention elected Robespierre to the Committee. Robespierre wanted to rally the masses to Jacobin doctrines and so he set up three laws to give them substantial advantages. One law set up the sale of the possessions of emigres in small lots, with a period of ten years for payment to be made. This made it possible for the less wealthy peasants to buy land (Duhaime). Another law provided for the subdivision of communal property in equal portions and the third law abolished hierarchy rights and dues founded on ancient charters.

Finally, to cushion the effect of rising prices there was a general increase in the salaries of civil servants (Matrat 204). As Robespierre's reign went on more and more people started attacking him, believing that he was working against the Revolution. Robespierre heard the people whispering about him when they thought he was not listening, but he was listening all the time. In a speech, he announced to everybody that he knew people where against them, but he wanted them to say it to his face. One man then spoke up against him and accused him.

Robespierre looked at the man calmly and did not criticize him, but thanked him. " Citizen, you had the courage to accuse me of wanting to be my country's enemy, in the face of the people's representatives, in this very place where I defended their rights. I thank you. I recognize in this deed the citizenship that characterizes the famous city that has sent you" (Matrat 175). Robespierre wanted to give the people a chance to speak their mind, but he always defended himself against the crimes that they claimed he did.

When being accused of “ having ceaselessly slandered the purest patriots” (Matrat 178), Robespierre came back with a speech that was calm and precise, one that made a strong impression and won him back some of the people of France. While in the Committee of Public Safety, Robespierre continued to prove to the people that he was indeed on their side. He knew that there were some who criticized the committee for its military policy, but also knew that they could only do so with the intention of embarrassing the government.

I realize that there is a scheme for paralyzing the Committee of Public Safety, by seeming to help it in its work, and that people are trying to vilify the executive power so that they can say that there is no longer an authority in France capable of holding the reins of government. The fact is that they want our places. Well, let them take them! I would like to see them, night and day, probing the wounds of the state, and spending their lives in finding a remedy for them. Do they want to extenuate our labours, or do they want to lead us to counter-revolution by betraying patriots in the hearts of the people (Matrat 223)?

As always, Robespierre had captivated the crowd and won their applause. He proved that the job he was doing was hard, and that if others wanted to take over, they would not be able to. They would only lead to the downfall of France. The war against Austria was over in the spring of 1794 and the French armies began to come home. Robespierre continued to murder those he thought were against him and France but the people no longer understood his actions. Up to a certain point the Terror had been justified by reverses in the war, but France was now victorious.



Robespierre was being called a tyrant for his murderous ways but he had a different view on the matter. “ They call me tyrant. If I were, they would grovel at my feet, I would gorge them with gold, I would give them the right to commit any crime” (Matrat 267). Even with the people of France turning against him and calling him a tyrant, he continued to do his best to help them. Robespierre set up a program for France that included a guarantee of food for everyone at low prices, distribution of land to the poor, public education, social security for the aged, ill and injured, and a progressive income tax (Blumberg 292).

Robespierre was the power and change France needed right up until the very end and no matter what the people did to him, said to him, or thought of him, he kept to his goals for France. Robespierre wanted a revolution, he wanted change and he, without a doubt brought it to France. Of all the Chiefs of the different groups which have successively reigned in the volcano of the French Revolution, Robespierre was the man whose Government promised to be the most durable; because he had the character of being the most incorruptible, and of being the man who had shown the least variation in his conduct (Ascherson 115).

Despite all the horror of the Reign of Terror, Maximilien Robespierre was a virtuous man. When France was in turmoil and panic Robespierre came in to fix everything and helped move France forward and push the Revolution onwards. He was a leader in the Committee of Public Safety and created laws all to try and help France. Even when people started to turn on him, he put forth a program to try and aid them. He cared about the people of France, and even France itself as a whole. Robespierre wanted France to

change and develop into the country he knew it would someday be and he was willing to do anything to achieve this goal.