

CHAPTER
23

HISTORYMAKERS

Maximilien Robespierre

Master and Victim of the Terror

Section 2

"Liberty cannot be secured unless criminals lose their heads."—Maximilien Robespierre, 1794

For a brief time, Maximilien François Marie Isidore de Robespierre ruled France. A passionate believer in equality, he kept a copy of Rousseau's *The Social Contract* by his bedside. As a religious man, he hoped to create a republic made virtuous through citizens' devotion to God. But despite his belief in equality and morality, Robespierre plunged France into the bloody Reign of Terror.

Robespierre was born in the city of Arras in 1758. He studied the ideas of the Enlightenment and developed strong principles of social justice. He followed the family tradition by practicing law.

Robespierre was elected to the Estates-General in 1789 and thus became involved in the French Revolution. Soft-spoken, he was ignored at first. Eventually, though, his radical opinions won him attention. One leader said, "That man will go far. He believes what he says." The next year, Robespierre was elected president of the Jacobin Club, a radical group that favored the establishment of a republic. Robespierre lived simply and was clearly a man of deep morality. Supporters called him "the Incorruptible."

Robespierre's views on republican government found little support early in the Revolution. However, after 1792, the king was deposed and a National Convention was elected to draft a new constitution and to rule France during the process. Robespierre was elected as a representative of Paris. He became a spokesman for the radical Jacobin group and contributed to the bitter controversies that arose in the National Convention.

As the combination of foreign war and civil lawlessness brought matters to a crisis, the Committee of Public Safety was formed—with Robespierre one of its most dominant members. Under the rule of this powerful group, civil war was avoided and the French army began to win victories.

However, Robespierre and his allies on the committee still faced political opposition at home. In early 1794, he set out to eliminate the Hébertists. This group wanted strict economic policies and an anti-religious campaign that Robespierre could

not support. The leaders were executed. Next Robespierre attacked a moderate group called the Indulgents, who were led by Georges Danton, once a close friend of his. The Indulgents believed that the crisis was past and the Terror could end. They, too, were tried and executed. As Danton was taken to his death, he uttered a warning: "Robespierre is bound to follow me."

After the death of Danton, Robespierre and the Committee of Public Safety—now completely in control of the government—made new rules. They broadened the definition of public enemies and narrowed the penalty to one punishment only: death. The trial process was speeded up. Defense lawyers and witnesses were no longer needed. Because of these changes, 1,500 people were executed in June and July of 1794.

"Fear was on every side, in the creak of a door, an exclamation, a breath," wrote one observer. On July 26, Robespierre spoke before the Convention and said that more people would have to be executed as enemies of the Republic. He only named one man, Pierre Joseph Cambon, the Superintendent of Finance, who bravely took the floor in his own defense. "It is time to tell the whole truth," he declared. "One man alone is paralyzing the will of the National Convention. *And that man is Robespierre.*" Others, fearing that they would be accused next, joined to denounce Robespierre.

The next day, in a chaotic scene, the deputies voted to arrest Robespierre and his closest allies. He and more than 20 of his supporters were taken to the Place de la Revolution and executed. A newspaper commented, "We are all throwing ourselves into each other's arms. The tyrant is dead."

Questions

1. **Making Inferences** What about Robespierre might have appealed to others?
2. **Drawing Conclusions** Why did Robespierre eliminate the Hébertists and the Indulgents?
3. **Recognizing Effects** How did Robespierre's methods turn against him?