**“Robespierre and the Terror.” Masha Linton.** [History Today](http://www.historytoday.com/archive/history-today/latest) [Volume 56 Issue 8 August 2006](http://www.historytoday.com/archive/history-today/volume-56-issue-8-august-2006)

*In a page minimum, explain in detail why Robespierre turned to mass violence to “save the Revolution.” Don’t forget to add a “so what?” and/or connection to the modern world.*

**Maximilien Robespierre** has always provoked strong feelings… There is no national monument to him, though many of the other revolutionaries have had statues raised to them. Robespierre is still considered beyond the pale; only one rather shabby metro station in a poorer suburb of Paris bears his name.

Although Robespierre, like most of the revolutionaries, was a **bourgeois**, he identified with the cause of the urban workers, the sans-culottes as they came to be known, and became a spokesman for them. It is for this reason that he came to dominate the Revolution in its most radical phase. This was the period of the Jacobin government, which lasted from June 1793 to Robespierre’s overthrow in July 1794; the months when the common people became briefly the masters of the first French republic, which had been proclaimed in September 1792. It is also known, more ominously, as the Terror…

Born in Arras in 1758, Robespierre suffered loss early in his life. His mother died when he was six, and soon after, his father abandoned the family. The children were brought up by elderly relatives who continually reminded them of their dependent situation and their father’s irresponsibility. Maximilien was the eldest, a conscientious, hardworking scholarship boy. As soon as he was able he shouldered the ­burden of caring for his younger siblings. He became a lawyer, leading a quiet and blameless life in his native town. He was best known for defending the poor...

In 1789, when he was in his early thirties, the Revolution transformed his destiny. He launched himself into the political maelstrom [storm] that would immerse him for the rest of his life. He was elected as a deputy for the Third Estate in the Estates General in May, and he witnessed the onset of the Revolution that broke the power of the absolute monarchy two months later… He had his power base in the **Jacobin** Club, the most important of the revolutionary clubs where people debated events.

From the first, Robespierre was a radical and a democrat, defending the principle that the ‘rights of man’ should extend to all men – including the poor, and the slaves in the colonies. This stance won him a reputation among the sans-culottes and the radical left, **but the earlier years of the Revolution were dominated by [wealthy bourgeois] men who had no wish to see power in the hands of the poor.** Robespierre… was also for a long time a vehement [strong] opponent of the death penalty. Why did he later change his mind and become an advocate of Terror? Part of the answer to this question lies in the deterioration of the political situation between 1789 and 1792, and the failure of the attempt to set up a workable constitutional monarchy, under Louis XVI.

From the spring of 1792 onwards France was involved in a spiral of war, revolt and civil war. Counter-­revolutionaries were plotting the restoration of the absolute monarchy with the support of the [Austrian] Emperor Leopold II (succeeded in March by Francis II)… The French army, far from being victorious, was on the verge of defeat and suffered from disorganization and raw and inexperienced troops. Many people thought (not without reason) that Louis XVI was secretly on the side of the Austrian and Prussian armies, which were now threatening Paris itself. Many now felt that Robespierre spoke for them when he declared that the aristocrats [nobles] were plotting a conspiracy to destroy the Revolution. In August the monarchy was overthrown in a pitched battle at the Tuileries palace. A new government, the **National Convention**, was formed in September 1792, which promptly declared France to be a republic. By now Robespierre’s ascendancy in the Jacobin club was unrivalled. The Jacobins identified themselves with the popular movement and the sans-culottes, who in turn saw popular violence as a political right.

The most notorious instance of the crowd’s rough justice was the prison massacres of September 1792, when around 2,000 people, including priests and nuns, were dragged from their prison cells, and subjected to summary ‘justice’. The Convention was determined to avoid a repeat of these brutal scenes, but that meant taking violence into their own hands as an instrument of government.

When the Convention debated the fate of Louis XVI, now a prisoner of the revolutionaries, Robespierre and his youthful colleague, Saint-Just (1767-94) – also once an opponent of the death penalty – led the way in claiming that ‘Louis must die in order for the Revolution to live’. Robespierre had not abandoned his libertarian convictions, but he was coming to the conclusion that the **ends justified the means**, and that in order to defend the Revolution against those who would destroy it, the shedding of blood was justified…

A **Committee of Public Safety** was established to act as a war cabinet. It became the chief executive power, with Robespierre – now moving from opposition to government for the first time – one of its twelve members… In September 1793, the impatient sans-culottes once again invaded the Convention to exert pressure on the deputies. They wanted economic measures to ensure their food supplies, and the government to deal with counter-revolutionaries. A delegation of the forty-eight sections of sans-culottes urged the Convention to ‘make Terror the order of the day!’ The Jacobins responded: the Law of Suspects was passed on September 17th, 1793, giving wide powers of arrest to the ruling Committees, and defining ‘suspects’ in broad terms. In October the Convention passed the Decree on Emergency Government. This authorized the revolutionary government to suspend peacetime rights and legal safeguards and to employ coercion and violence. They decreed that the government ‘would be revolutionary until the peace’. The constitution was shelved: the libertarian ideals of the Revolution were suspended, indefinitely. Sans-culottes formed armed militias to go out into the provinces to requisition [seize] supplies for the armies and the urban populace and to root out counter-revolutionaries...

For the first time in history terror became an official government policy, with the stated aim to use violence in order to achieve a higher political goal. **Unlike the later meaning of ‘terrorists’ as people who use violence against a government, the terrorists of the French Revolution were the government.** The Terror was legal, having been voted for by the Convention…

Throughout his time in government Robespierre conducted his private life as a man of virtue. Far from living in palaces, amassing treasure, or allying himself with royalty, as Napoleon was to do, Robespierre lived a celibate life as a lodger, occupying simple rooms in the house of a master carpenter. He was known as ‘the Incorruptible’ for, unlike many politicians, he refused to use a public position for private gain and self-advancement. He lived simply on his deputy’s salary. He walked everywhere, never taking a carriage. He enjoyed walks in the country and musical soirées with his landlord’s family.

Yet the other side of this benign, if dull, domestic life, was the public role he undertook as a spokesman for the Committee of Public Safety and the guiding hand on the policy of Terror. He had become an astute [clever] political tactician, and he used these means finally to achieve political power. He could be accused, justly, of political ambition, but he himself did not see this as inconsistent with his dedication to the Revolution. He had an unshakable belief that his own aims coincided with what was best for the Revolution. He was a man of painful sincerity. He was not a hypocrite. He really did believe that the Terror could sustain the **republic of virtue** [the perfect, just society that the Revolutionaries were trying to build]…

The men who overthrew Robespierre were more ruthless and cynical **terrorists** than he… Initially they wanted the Terror to continue. But it rapidly became clear that the public had sickened of it. Since the overwhelming victory over the Austrians in the Low Countries at Fleurus on June 26th, the military justification for it had also diminished. In the reaction after **Thermidor**, as the coup [overthrowing Robespierre] is known, terrorist politicians rapidly restyled themselves. Members of the Committees now claimed that they had concerned themselves exclusively with the war: it was only the Robespierrists who had been terrorists.

In the popular imagination Robespierre the enigma rapidly became the embodiment of the Terror. Yet he would never have been so influential had he not spoken for a wide swathe of society and government. When he spoke of conspiracies against the Revolution, of the threats to ‘the patrie [France] in danger’, and the need for extreme measures, he voiced the fears of many at that time that France was about to be overwhelmed by foreign and internal enemies. The policies of the Jacobin Committees had, after all, been endorsed by the deputies of the Convention. Perhaps this is why he has been so vilified [harshly criticized]: in holding one individual culpable for the ills of the Terror, French society was able to avoid looking into its own dark heart at that traumatic moment. Robespierre, you might say, took the rap.