

FATHER OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

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ABSTRACT

This article is about the person named the Father of French Revolution, a French revolutionary, one of the most famous and influential representatives of the Great French Revolution, an Artois democrat, the president of the French National Convention.

Keywords: Oratorians, Altruism, National Convention, Isidore, Lycurgus, Danton, Spartans, Girondins, Arras, Jacobin club.

INTRODUCTION

Several hundred children were born in Arras in 1758. One of them was Maximilien Francois Marie Isidore de Robespierre, born and baptised on 6 May, the son of François de Robespierre, a lawyer, and Jacqueline Carraut, daughter of a brewer. A family drama had played out in the months beforehand, for Jacqueline had been five months pregnant at the time of her marriage, and François' parents had refused to attend the ceremony in the well-to-do parish church of Saint-Jean-en-Ronville.[3]

From 1765 he attended the college of the Oratorians at Arras, and in 1769 he was awarded a scholarship to the famous college of Louis-le-Grand in Paris, where he distinguished himself in philosophy and law. He received a law degree in 1781 and became a lawyer at Arras, where he set up house with his sister Charlotte. He soon made a name for himself and was appointed a judge at the Salle Épiscopale, a court with jurisdiction over the provostship of the diocese. His private practice provided him with a comfortable income. He was admitted to the Arras Academy in 1783 and soon became its chancellor and later its president. Contrary to the long-held belief that Robespierre led an isolated life, he often visited local notables and mingled with the young people of the district. He entered academic competitions, and his "Mémoire sur les peines infamantes" ("Report on Degrading Punishments") won first prize at the Academy of Metz. By 1788 Robespierre was already well known for his altruism. As a lawyer representing poor people, he had alarmed the privileged classes by his protests in his "Mémoire pour le Sieur Dupond" ("Report for Lord Dupond") against royal

absolutism and arbitrary justice. When the summoning of the Estates-General (a national assembly that had not been called since 1614) was announced, he issued an appeal entitled *À la nation artésienne sur la nécessité de réformer les Etats d'Artois* ("To the People of Artois on the Necessity of Reforming the Estates of Artois"). In March 1789 the citizens of Arras chose him as one of their representatives, and the Third Estate (the commons) of the bailiwick elected him fifth of the eight deputies from Artois. Thus he began his political career at the age of 30.[8]

That would not happen, for in 1789 he was elected a Third Estate representative for Artois to the Estates-General convoked by Louis XVI. As Louis' attempt at fiscal reform escalated into revolution, Robespierre found himself at the heart of what he described as the greatest events in history. We know little of his private life at this point. Within a year the relative unknown from the provinces became a household name because of his uncompromising stand on what he saw as key revolutionary principles, such as universal manhood suffrage. He was outspoken also in support of reforms to family law, such as that enforcing equal inheritance between children (8-13 April 1791), and again extolled the virtues of the ideal family. Robespierre attacked patriarchal power over property as inimical to good relations between fathers and children which should be based on "the nature, care, tenderness, and virtue of fathers".[1]

Following Louis XVI's abortive attempt to flee France in June 1791 and the polarisation of political opinions, violent confrontation in Paris threatened Robespierre in person. A fellow member of the Jacobin Club, Maurice Duplay, urged him to move for his own safety into his residence in the Rue Saint-Honoré, closer to both the Assembly and the Jacobin Club.[4] The Duplays were more than twenty years older than Robespierre, and their family included three daughters. The eldest daughter was called Eléonore; she was 20, and they became close friends. The Duplays may have given him the family life he had never had. It also seems to have created unbearable tensions for Maximilien's sister Charlotte. In 1792 she came from Arras to Paris, living at first with her brother at the Duplays, where – she admitted forty years later – she found the women intolerable in their suffocating devotion to Maximilien, especially the mother. Certainly, he does seem to have been attractive to those women drawn to men who seem both passionate and vulnerable, and in need of happiness. He was a small and frail man, but steadfast about the revolutionary virtues in the face of mockery. His secretary in 1790, Pierre Villiers, recalled the impressive volume of mail the deputy received each day, especially from women.[6] When the National Assembly was dissolved in September 1791, groups of Parisians were waiting outside to applaud Robespierre and others, shouting "Long live Robespierre! Long live the Incorruptible!," a reference to the nickname Robespierre had enjoyed since May. Then

they were stopped by women, one of whom presented her child. “At least,” she said, “You will allow this child to kiss you.” One of the women then made a speech to Robespierre: In the midst of corruption, you have remained the unshakeable support of truth; always steadfast, always incorruptible...

This People, I say, speaks your name only with high regard; you are its guardian angel, its hope, its consolation. O, Robespierre, its love, its veneration will forever avenge the black and ugly plots of your cowardly detractors. This particular attraction Robespierre had for women – political as well as emotional – was to become a major point of division when France became a republic in 1792. On 29 October 1792 the new National Convention heard charges against Robespierre from prominent opponents among the Girondins, holding him responsible for the massacres after the overthrow of the monarchy in August and claiming that he was aiming at dictatorship with Marat.

The Scottish doctor John Moore agreed: his speeches are “barren in argument, sometimes fertile in the flowers of fancy ... Robespierre’s eloquence is said to be peculiarly admired by the [female] sex.”[2] Whatever the value of Condorcet’s opinion, when it came to attitudes to children and gender roles, Robespierre was more likely to turn to the tales of ancient Sparta he had learnt at secondary school than to Christianity. In July 1793 Robespierre outlined a draft education policy. With the Constitution and the law code, he argued that this was one of the “monuments which the Convention owes to History.” The proposal was remarkably bold and wideranging, and with an emphasis on the “Spartan” virtues he had absorbed as a schoolboy from Plutarch’s Life of Lycurgus.

Hostile biographers of Robespierre have both exaggerated the psychological damage that may have been done to a small boy by the sad circumstances of his mother’s death and have minimized his abilities and achievements as a youth and young man. The combined effect has been to paint a portrait of a shrewd but envious and callous man for whom the chaos of revolution opened up possibilities about which this competent but vicious small-town lawyer could only have fantasized. For the psychoanalyst Jacques André, from 1789 Robespierre’s public and political life became as one with his libidinal life, of which elements were his sexualization of revolutionary crowds, his unconscious homosexuality and his narcissism. It is now fifty years since the great cultural historian Peter Gay gave a brilliant and controversial paper using psychological techniques to analyse the oratory of Robespierre and Danton.[5]

CONCLUSION

Of all the people who came to prominence in the French Revolution, none has attracted as much attention as this one man, Maximilien Robespierre. In the minds of many observers he is synonymous with the Revolution itself. His political principles

were those of the radical revolution—liberty, equality, and the ‘rights of man’ for all men. As for his methods, he will be forever remembered as the man who linked ‘virtue’ with ‘terror’ in a speech made during the height of the recourse to terror, in February 1794, and the man who played a leading role in the notorious Law of Prairial in June 1794 that expedited the procedures of the Revolutionary Tribunal.

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