**BACKGROUND**

[Socrates](https://www.famous-trials.com/socrates/834-socratesbio), the son of a sculptor (or stonecutter) and a midwife, was a young boy when the rise to power of Pericles brought on the dawning of the "Golden Age of Greece." As a young man, Socrates saw a fundamental power shift, as Pericles--perhaps history's first liberal politician--acted on his belief that the masses, and not just property-owning aristocrats, deserved liberty. Pericles created the people's courts and used the public treasury to promote the arts. He pushed ahead with an unprecedented building program designed not only to demonstrate the glory that was Greece, but also to ensure full employment and provide opportunities for wealth creation among the non-propertied class. The rebuilding of the Acropolis and the construction of the Parthenon were the two best known of Pericles' many ambitious building projects.

Growing to adulthood in this bastion of liberalism and democracy, Socrates somehow developed a set of values and beliefs that would put him at odds with most of his fellow Athenians. Socrates was not a democrat or an egalitarian. To him, the people should not be self-governing; they were like a herd of sheep that needed the direction of a wise shepherd. He denied that citizens had the basic virtue necessary to nurture a good society, instead equating virtue with a knowledge unattainable by ordinary people. Striking at the heart of Athenian democracy, he contemptuously criticized the right of every citizen to speak in the Athenian assembly.

Writing in the third-century C.E. in his The Lives of Eminent Philosophers, [Diogenes Laertius](https://www.famous-trials.com/socrates/834-socratesbio) reported that Socrates "discussed moral questions in the workshops and the marketplace." Often his unpopular views, expressed disdainfully and with an air of condescension, provoked his listeners to anger. Laertius wrote that "men set upon him with their fists or tore his hair out," but that Socrates "bore all this ill-usage patiently."

We get one contemporary view of Socrates from playwright [Aristophanes](https://www.famous-trials.com/images/ftrials/TrialofSocrates/img/aristophanes.jpg). In his play [*Clouds*](https://www.famous-trials.com/socrates/829-clouds), first produced in 423 B.C.E., Aristophanes presents Socrates as an eccentric and comic headmaster of a "thinkery" (or "thoughtery"). He is portrayed "stalking the streets" of Athens barefoot, "rolling his eyes" at remarks he found unintelligent, and "gazing up" at the clouds. Socrates at the time of Clouds must have been perceived more as a harmless town character than as a serious threat to Athenian values and democracy. Socrates himself, apparently, took no offense at his portrayal in Clouds. Plutarch, in his Moralia, quoted Socrates as saying, "When they break a jest upon me in the theatre, I feel as if I were at a big party of good friends." Plato, in his Symposium, describes Socrates and Aristophanes engaged in friendly conversation.

Other plays of the time offer additional clues as to the reputation of Socrates in Athens. Comic poet Eupolis has one of his characters say: "Yes, and I loathe that poverty-stricken windbag Socrates, who contemplates everything in the world but does not know where his next meal is coming from." Birds, a play of Aristophanes written six years after his Clouds, contains a revealing reference. Aristophanes labels a gang of pro-Sparta aristocratic youths as "Socratified." Sparta--the model of a closed society--and Athens were enemies: the remark suggests Socrates' teaching may have started to be seen as subversive by 417 B.C.E.

The standing of Socrates among his fellow citizens suffered mightily during two periods in which Athenian democracy was temporarily overthrown, one four-month period in 411-410 and another slightly longer period in 404-403. The prime movers in both of the anti-democratic movements were former pupils of Socrates, Alcibiades and Critias. Athenians undoubtedly considered the teachings of Socrates--especially his expressions of disdain for the established constitution--partially responsible for the resulting death and suffering. Alcibiades, perhaps Socrates' favorite Athenian politician, masterminded the first overthrow. (Alcibiades had other strikes against him: four years earlier, Alcibiades had fled to Sparta to avoid facing trial for mutilating religious pillars--[statues of Hermes](https://www.famous-trials.com/images/ftrials/TrialofSocrates/img/herm.gif)--and, while in Sparta, had proposed to that state's leaders that he help them defeat Athens.) Critias, first among an oligarchy known as the "Thirty Tyrants," led the second bloody revolt against the restored Athenian democracy in 404. The revolt sent many of Athens's leading democratic citizens (including Anytus, later the driving force behind the prosecution of Socrates) into exile, where they organized a resistance movement.

Critias, without question, was the more frightening of the two former pupils of Socrates. [I.F. Stone](https://www.famous-trials.com/images/ftrials/TrialofSocrates/img/stone.jpg), in his [*The Trial of Socrates*](https://www.famous-trials.com/socrates/821-ifstoneinterivew), describes Critias (a cousin of Plato's) as "the first Robespierre," a cruel and inhumane man "determined to remake the city to his own antidemocratic mold whatever the human cost." The oligarchy confiscated the estates of Athenian aristocrats, banished 5,000 women, children, and slaves, and summarily executed about 1,500 of the most prominent democrats of Athens.

One incident involving Socrates and the Thirty Tyrants would later become an issue at his trial. Although the Thirty normally used their own gang of thugs for such duties, the oligarchy asked Socrates to arrest Leon of Salamis so that he might be executed and his assets appropriated. Socrates refused to do so. Socrates would point to his resistance to the order as evidence of his good conduct. On the other hand, Socrates neither protested the decision nor took steps to warn Leon of Salamis of the order for his arrest--he just went home. While good citizens of Athens were being liquidated right and left, Socrates--so far as we know--did or said nothing to stop the violence.

The horrors brought on by the Thirty Tyrants caused Athenians to look at Socrates in a new light. His teachings no longer seemed so harmless. He was no longer a lovable town eccentric. Socrates--and his icy logic--came to be seen as a dangerous and corrupting influence, a breeder of tyrants and enemy of the common man.