

NAME: _____

DAY: _____

THE TERROR GRIPS FRANCE

Foreign armies were not the only enemies of the French republic. The Jacobins had thousands of enemies within France itself. These included peasants who were horrified by the king's execution, priests who would not accept government control, and rival leaders who were stirring up rebellion in the provinces. How to contain and control these enemies became a central issue. Robespierre Assumes Control In the early months of 1793, one Jacobin leader, **Maximilien Robespierre** (ROHBZ•peer), slowly gained power. Robespierre and his supporters set out to build a “republic of virtue” by wiping out every trace of France's past. Firm believers in reason, they changed the calendar, dividing the year into 12 months of 30 days and renaming each month. This calendar had no Sundays because the radicals considered religion old-fashioned and dangerous. They even closed all churches in Paris, and cities and towns all over France soon did the same.

In July 1793, Robespierre became leader of the Committee of Public Safety. For the next year, Robespierre governed France virtually as a dictator, and the period of his rule became known as the **Reign of Terror**. The Committee of Public Safety's chief task was to protect the Revolution from its enemies. Under Robespierre's leadership, the committee often had these “enemies” tried in the morning and guillotined in the afternoon. Robespierre justified his use of terror by suggesting that it enabled French citizens to remain true to the ideals of the Revolution. He also saw a connection between virtue and terror:



PRIMARY SOURCE

The first maxim of our politics ought to be to lead the people by means of reason and the enemies of the people by terror. If the basis of popular government in time of peace is virtue, the basis of popular government in time of revolution is both virtue and terror: virtue without which terror is murderous, terror without which virtue is powerless. Terror is nothing else than swift, severe, indomitable justice; it flows, then, from virtue.

MAXIMILIEN ROBESPIERRE, “On the Morals and Political Principles of Domestic Policy” (1794)

The “enemies of the Revolution” who troubled Robespierre the most were fellow radicals who challenged his leadership. In 1793 and 1794, many of those who had led the Revolution received death sentences. Their only crime was that they were considered less radical than Robespierre. By early 1794, even Georges Danton found himself in danger. Danton’s friends in the National Convention, afraid to defend him, joined in condemning him. On the scaffold, he told the executioner, “Don’t forget to show my head to the people. It’s well worth seeing.”



▲ At his trial, Georges Danton defended himself so skillfully that the authorities eventually denied him the right to speak.

The Terror claimed not only the famous, such as Danton and Marie Antoinette, the widowed queen. Thousands of unknown people also were sent to their deaths, often on the flimsiest of charges. For example, an 18-year-old youth was sentenced to die for cutting down a tree that had been planted as a symbol of liberty. Perhaps as many as 40,000 were executed during the Terror. About 85 percent were peasants or members of the urban poor or middle class— for whose benefit the Revolution had been launched.

Beheading by Class

More than 2,100 people were executed during the last 132 days of the Reign of Terror. The pie graph below displays the breakdown of beheadings by class.



THE REIGN OF TERROR

- 1. WHAT CHALLENGES WERE THE JACOBINS FACING IN THE EARLY MONTHS OF 1793?**
- 2. HOW DID ROBESPIERRE BUILD HIS "REPUBLIC OF VIRTUE" (GIVE MULTIPLE EXAMPLES)?**
- 3. WHY DO YOU THINK ROBESPIERRE'S TIME OF RULE WAS KNOWN AS THE REIGN OF TERROR?**
- 4. WHAT IS THE IRONY OF A MAN LIKE ROBESPIERRE BECOMING A DICTATOR?**
- 5. WHAT FATE DID GEORGES DANTON FACE IN EARLY 1794 AND WHY DID THIS HAPPEN TO HIM (IN YOUR OPINION)?**
- 6. WHO WERE SOME OF THE VICTIMS OF "THE TERROR"?**
- 7. WHAT GROUP OF PEOPLE MADE UP THE LARGEST PERCENTAGE OF VICTIMS DURING THE TERROR? WHAT DOES THIS SAY ABOUT THE "SUCCESS" OF THE REVOLUTION?**