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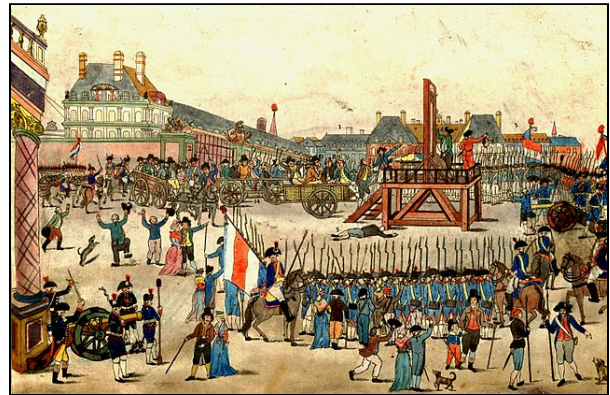
Class: _____

The Reign of Terror

By Jessica McBirney
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The French Revolution was a time of drastic social and political change in France that lasted from 1789 to 1799. During the Revolution, a period known as the Reign of Terror took place from 1793 to 1794. In this informational text, Jessica McBirney discusses what contributed to the Reign of Terror and how it impacted France. As you read, take notes on the causes of the Reign of Terror.

- [1] In today's culture, there is quite a bit of lore about the French Revolution. We talk about the storming of the Bastille, we get drawn into the story of Marie Antoinette, and the guillotine - a device used for execution by dropping a huge blade down on the victim's neck - has become one of the most iconic weapons in history. But the French Revolution, spanning from 1789 to 1799, was complicated and extremely violent. The deadliest period was between 1793 and 1794. Known as the Reign of Terror, this was the year that Maximilien Robespierre ran the Revolutionary government.



"The execution of Robespierre and his supporters on 28 July 1794" by Unknown is in the public domain.

Build Up to Terror: Understanding the French Revolution

A variety of technological, cultural, and philosophical developments in the eighteenth century collided to cause the French Revolution. Advancements in agriculture and medicine led to a population expansion across Europe. This was especially so in France, which, by the 1780s, was the most populous country in Europe. As the size of the lower classes increased, the poor peasants became increasingly frustrated with the oppressive feudal system and the wealthy lords that still ruled France. The feudal system divided France into three "estates:" one estate was the Clergy, the religious leaders; another was the Nobles, the wealthy landowning rulers who inherited their wealth and power; and the Third Estate, the Peasantry, laborers who worked the land and paid taxes to the other two estates. Feudalism put almost all political power in the hands of nobles and clergy, and it took advantage of the commoners - the Third Estate.

Enlightenment¹ scholars and philosophers hit on this sense of frustration when they began publishing books about equality, political representation, and limited governments.

These ideas gained popularity especially among higher-income commoners (such as craftsmen or small landowners), who called themselves the bourgeoisie. They wanted a government that would represent all three estates (nobles, clergy, and commoners). When the governing body of France met, the Third Estate broke away to form a new government, the National Assembly. When they faced threats from others who opposed their reforms, the commoners seized the Bastille, an old building that had become a symbol of the monarchy's power. Bastille Day, July 14, 1789, is generally recognized as the beginning of the Revolution.

A New Government: the Arm of Terror

- [5] The new government was established and led by the National Constituent Assembly. A political party called the Montagnards took control by late 1792 and established extreme policies designed to give the lower classes more political and economic power. They implemented price controls on staple² food items, heavily taxed the rich, established numerous welfare programs, offered free education, and even mandated the sale of property belonging to the rich.

To build and maintain their power, the Montagnards felt compelled to squelch³ opposition wherever it arose. Some people said the reforms needed to be more extreme, while others said the existing policies were already too extreme; both opposing opinions had to be crushed. So they created the Revolutionary Tribunal and the Committee of Public Safety in the spring of 1793. Both of these government entities were responsible for finding, trying, and punishing anyone who posed a threat to the new government.

Escalation: Robespierre, the Law of Suspects, and the Law of 22 Prairial

In July of 1793, a man named Maximilien Robespierre joined the Committee of Public Safety. He led an extremist political group known as the Jacobins and believed that the principles and goals of the Revolution must be advanced no matter the cost. He believed that in times of war or crisis, terror was necessary to enforce justice and virtue. By September, he and the Committee passed the Law of Suspects, a law which called for the arrest of anyone who seemed remotely opposed to the new regime. The law stated, "It is time to horrify all the conspirators. So legislators, place Terror on the order of the day! Let us be in revolution, because everywhere counter-revolution is being woven by our enemies. The blade of the law should hover over all the guilty." This officially began the Reign of Terror.

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1. The Enlightenment was a European intellectual movement during the late 17th and 18th centuries that focused on individualism rather than tradition.
 2. **Staple** (*adjective*) main or important
 3. **Squelch** (*verb*) to forcefully silence or suppress

Over the next year, 300,000 suspects were arrested, 17,000 of whom were executed by Robespierre. Even more died in prisons without a trial. Famously, the guillotine was Robespierre's weapon of choice; at times, so many "suspects" were killed on the same day that blood ran down the streets of Paris and caused a terrible stench.

The Law of 22 Prairial, not instituted until June of 1794, further intensified the Terror. It suspended the right to a public trial and the right to legal assistance. It also gave juries two options: either acquit⁴ the suspect on trial or sentence the suspect to death. Not surprisingly, this greatly increased the death rate during the summer of 1794.

The End of Terror: Robespierre's Arrest

- [10] Dissenters on both sides grew displeased with Robespierre's leadership. They conspired to leverage public opinion against him, and their efforts succeeded. During one particularly heated meeting of the Committee at the end of July 1794, violence broke out, and it was clear that Robespierre was in trouble. In the chaos, he attempted to escape by jumping out a second-story window, but the fall broke both of his legs, and he received a bullet wound to the jaw (it is still unclear if he was shot or if he tried and failed to commit suicide). He was arrested and guillotined the very next day, without a trial.

With the fall of Robespierre came the end of the Terror and the extreme economic policies across France. In 1795 France set up another republican system of government with a new constitution. But, between the still-high Revolutionary tensions and ongoing military conflicts abroad, the regime was never stable enough to survive. After several years of instability and political coups,⁵ Napoleon Bonaparte established himself as the country's "First Consul" and later as emperor. Napoleon, of course, is well known for his military success throughout Europe and his dictatorial control of France.

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- 4. to free someone from a criminal charge
 - 5. a sudden, violent, and illegal takeover of a government

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement expresses the central idea of the text?
 - A. Despite the violence that transpired, the French Revolution was considered a success, as it gave the power to the Third Estate.
 - B. Robespierre used the Reign of Terror to punish people he personally disliked, rather than to enforce beliefs of the Revolution.
 - C. The unfair treatment of the Third Estate drove peasants to revolt and use violence to pursue political power.
 - D. Despite the Third Estate's revolt and establishment of a new government, peasants continued to be taken advantage of.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "When they faced threats from others who opposed their reforms, the commoners seized the Bastille, an old building that had become a symbol of the monarchy's power." (Paragraph 4)
 - B. "A political party called the Montagnards took control by late 1792 and established extreme policies designed to give the lower classes more political and economic power." (Paragraph 5)
 - C. "Over the next year, 300,000 suspects were arrested, 17,000 of whom were executed by Robespierre. Even more died in prisons without a trial." (Paragraph 8)
 - D. "After several years of instability and political coups, Napoleon Bonaparte established himself as the country's 'First Consul' and later as emperor." (Paragraph 11)

3. Which of the following describes the author's main purpose in the text?
 - A. to explain why the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror should not be glorified
 - B. to detail the complexities of the French Revolution and how the Reign of Terror transpired
 - C. to show why people continue to be interested in the events of the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror
 - D. to show how the events of the Reign of Terror were necessary to achieve political equality

4. How did the Reign of Terror, according to the text, develop over time?
- A. The tactics that the government used to enforce the ideals of the Revolution became increasingly extreme over time.
 - B. Peasants became angrier as the Revolution progressed, as they felt changes were not occurring quickly enough.
 - C. The Revolution shifted from achieving political equality to punishing intellectuals during the Reign of Terror.
 - D. The Reign of Terror became more about securing power over time than protecting the rights of the people.

5. What connection does the author draw between the Enlightenment and the French Revolution? Cite evidence from the text in your response.

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. Bastille Day marks the beginning of the French Revolution. How was the Third Estate able to take control of their fate? Are there groups in our world today who are taking control of their own fate? Explain.
2. Robespierre was extremely committed to the ideas of the French Revolution. How did his power over others corrupt him? How did this corruption prevent France from achieving the equality they strived for through the French Revolution? What are other examples in history of leaders becoming corrupted by their power?
3. When the reign of terror ended, France was not stable enough to form the republic the people wanted. What were the consequences of the French Revolution? Do you think that the social and political changes that take place during revolutions are worth the violence that transpires? Why or why not?

4. Before the French Revolution, France was divided into three estates based on social status. How did the differences in social status cause problems in France? Do you think there are similar differences concerning social status among different groups of people in the United States today? How does this create political and economic inequalities?