The Reign of Terror: Was It Justified?

Overview: The French Revolution began in 1789 as an attempt to form a new government in France. It was a revolution that did not follow a simple path. One broadside (poster) from the time read, "Unity, Indivisibility of the Republic, Liberty, Equality, Fraternity or Death." It is the last word, of course, that is troubling. This Mini-Q asks you to consider the revolutionary values expressed above, and the means used by the French revolutionary government to put those values in place.

The Documents:

Document A: Declaration of the Rights of Man
Document B: Timeline of the Reign of Terror
Document C: The Outside and Inside Threats (maps)
Document D: Letter from the Vendée
Document E: The Committee of Public Safety
Document F: The Guillotine (image)
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In 1789 the French Revolution upset a centuries-old French applecart. In the eyes of many, however, the applecart needed upsetting. For years, absolute monarchs had ruled the French nation with little consideration for the majority of the people. The king, Louis XVI, was having his troubles. France was in serious debt because of expensive wars in Europe. France had worsened her debt by helping America fight the British overseas. Meanwhile, at home, poor people were starving. The price of bread had skyrocketed because bad weather had devastated the grain harvest. Making matters still worse was a confusing and unfair tax system. To his credit, Louis sought the advice of nobles, church officials, and even commoners, but the problems just grew.

When Louis XVI called the Estates General, an assembly of 1,200 men, to help solve the financial crisis, he unleashed change he could not control. On June 20, 1789, a powerful group of men walked out of the Estates General and vowed to create a new Constitution. Three weeks later, mobs of Parisians stormed an old fortress called the Bastille and stole weapons that would later be used against the royal government forces. On August 26, the new revolutionary government signed a document called the Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen which ensured “Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity” for the people of France. Half the adult male population was given the right to vote, reducing the power of the king, the nobles, and the Catholic Church, while giving new powers to the common people.

Not everyone loved the reforms. The nobility and the Catholic Church were unhappy because they lost a chunk of their property and power. Monarchs in neighboring countries like England, Austria, and Prussia were unhappy because they feared a spread of the revolution. Some peasants in the French countryside were unhappy about having to fight in the foreign wars that had started as a result of the revolution. To deal with this opposition, the French revolution became more radical. Led by a chief prosecutor named Maximilien Robespierre, the king was found guilty of crimes against the state and guillotined in a public square on January 21, 1793. His wife, Marie Antoinette, was executed nine months later.

The execution of Louis XVI gave way to a year-long period of the French Revolution known as “The Reign of Terror.” Led by Robespierre, the new government proceeded to execute large numbers of individuals whom it considered to be enemies of the revolution. Among its targets were the Catholic Church, which they regarded as the old order, the nobles, and peasant rebels. At the same time, international tensions escalated into war. The new government had to do battle both inside and outside the country.

In mid-1794 the Reign of Terror came to a rather abrupt end. Robespierre himself was executed and a more conservative government was put in place. Within five years Napoleon would take control.

But our focus is on the Reign of Terror. This Mini-Q asks you to consider how far a people and a government should go to preserve their vision of liberty and equality. In 1793 and 1794, were conditions in France serious enough to require such a violent response by the revolutionary government? In other words, The Reign of Terror: Was it justified?
Document A

Source: Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizens, August 27, 1789.

Note: The Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizens was written and signed by the National Assembly, which was the governing body in the first stage of the Revolution. This document served as a preamble to the new French constitution.

The representatives of the French people, organized as a National Assembly, believe that the ignorance, neglect, or contempt of the rights of man are the sole causes of public calamities and the corruption of the government.... Therefor, the National Assembly recognizes and proclaims ... the following rights of man and of the citizens:

Article 1: Men are born and remain free and equal in rights.

Article 2: The aim of all [government] ... is the preservation of the natural ... rights of man. These are liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression.

Article 7: No person shall be accused, arrested, or imprisoned, except in the cases [allowed] by law.

Article 9: All persons are held innocent until they shall have been declared guilty....

Article 10: No one should be silenced on account of his opinions, including his religious views.

Document Analysis

1. Who issued the Declaration of the Rights of Man? When was it written?

2. According to the National Assembly, what were the “sole causes of public calamities and the corruption of government”?

3. According to Article 2, what should be the aim of all government?

4. What Article in the Declaration would be violated if government officials arrested and executed someone without a trial for speaking out against the government?
Document B

Source: Various sources.

Timeline of the Reign of Terror

1789  May-August  Beginning of the French Revolution; King Louis XVI forced to share power
      Declaration of Rights of Man issued

1790  June 19     All hereditary titles and privileges of nobility are abolished.
      July 12     Civil Constitution of the Clergy is adopted; clergy (priests) required to swear loyalty
                    to the revolution

1791  July 20-21  The Royal family is caught trying to flee France and is forced to return to Paris.
      August 27  Austria and Prussia express support for French monarchy.

1792  April 20    France declares war on Austria, and Prussia joins Austria.
      September  Monarchy is abolished, Republican government established.
      Dec-Jan     Trial, conviction, and execution of Louis XVI for treason

1793  March       Committee of Public Safety is created to fight “enemies of the revolution.”
      April       Counterrevolutionary revolts break out inside France.
      July 27     Maximilien Robespierre is appointed to the Committee of Public Safety
      August      Levée en Masse (forced military draft for all French males) fuels revolts.
      September 5 Robespierre declares “Terror the order of the day;” beginning of Reign of Terror
      September 17 Law of Suspects passed which limited rights of the accused
      November    Festival of Reason. Christian churches are soon closed by revolutionary government.
      December    Committee of Public Safety cracks down on rebels.
                    Counterrevolution in western France is near collapse.

1794  April / May French victory over foreign enemies is nearly complete.
      June        Government denies legal counsel to accused enemies of the revolution. The number
                    of government executions sharply increases.
      July        Robespierre is executed by guillotine. The Reign of Terror is declared over.

Document Analysis

1. From the beginning of the Revolution in 1789 until September 1792, what kind of government did
   France have?

2. What events appear to have caused the Revolutionary government to execute the King?

3. How many months passed between Robespierre appointment to the Committee of Public Safety
   and his execution?

4. What evidence is there that people’s “natural rights” were denied during the Reign of Terror?

5. What evidence is there that the Reign of Terror was successful in fighting enemies both inside and
   outside of France?
Document C

Source: Maps created from various sources.

1. In August 1792, an 80,000-man army marched into France. Nearly half the force was Prussian, and the other half Austrian. Austria and Prussia were monarchies and both were afraid that revolution might spread to their countries. Nearly 10,000 French army officers and aristocrats had also moved to the Austrian-controlled Netherlands. These émigrés formed armies and allied themselves with France’s foreign enemies.

2. The tide changed in September of 1792 when the French fought back and won the famous Battle of Valmy. The French army had three purposes in mind: to protect the new government at home; to spread the revolutionary ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity beyond its borders; and to punish the French émigrés.

3. By the fall of 1793 the foreign threat was halted. By May, 1794, French victory was near.

1. In the spring of 1793, a counterrevolution against the Republican government broke out. The Vendée region was the center of this revolt. People there fiercely fought against the military draft called the levée en masse and against laws that tried to abolish Christianity in France.

2. The counterrevolutionaries included some members of the aristocracy, priests, peasants, and townspeople. They were a mixed lot of French men and women who were disliked by revolutionary government.

3. Historians estimate that more than 80,000 French people on both sides died in the Vendée in 1793.

Document Analysis

1. What was the outside threat that faced the French revolutionaries in 1792 and 1793?

2. Who were the émigrés and how did they threaten revolutionary France?

3. What was happening inside of France that threatened the success of the Revolution?

4. Why might some French peasants oppose the revolutionary government?

5. How could you use this document to prove that the Reign of Terror was or was not justified?
Document D

Source: Letter from the Vendée, 1793.

Note: This letter was sent to the National Convention (the revolutionary government in Paris) by a local government official in western France. At this time, counterrevolutionary activity had been increasing for more than a year. This official is reporting that soldiers sent by the government have failed to stop the “rabble” and he is writing for more help.

(Town of) Niort, 25 August, 1793, Year IV of Freedom

The departmental adviser reported to you, in the last mail, the troubling events which occurred in the district of Châtillon. New information shows us that the crowd is continuing to gather.... The council meanwhile has taken strong measures, and at this moment there are three thousand national guardsmen in the region to establish order. It is with the greatest of sorrow that we inform you that six patriots have already fallen victim to this rabble, but at least forty of their number were killed.

We had reason to hope that these gatherings would cease as soon as the public troops arrived. Our hopes were misguided, and this causes us the greatest of worries. We can not hide from you, sirs, that a severe and swift example needs to be set. Already several of these bandits have been arrested, and the departmental adviser requests that you issue a decree whereby the criminal court of Niort judges this case as the last resort.* It is the only way to bring peace back to this unfortunate region. We hope that you will not refuse us this request.

*Judgment of last resort: the local court has final say. There can be no appeal, even for a death by guillotine conviction.

Document Analysis

1. When was this letter written?

2. Who wrote the letter and to whom?

3. What is the purpose of the letter?

4. Is there any evidence in the document that helps you measure the size of the revolt? Explain.

5. How can you use the document to argue that the Reign of Terror was justified or not justified?
[In March 1793] the revolutionary Tribunal (a court of justice) was established to try all crimes against the state. Tribunal members would not be elected by the people, but appointed by the National Convention (the revolutionary government) and their power would be absolute. Watch committees were set up in every neighborhood to ferret out and expel any foreigners suspected of counterrevolutionary activities. On April 6, 1793, [the revolutionary government established] the Committee of Public Safety.... The purpose was to “protect the public safety” from enemies both in and outside of France. The Committee soon employed a shadowy network of informers and spies to achieve these ends. No one was safe from suspicion. A careless word of criticism spoken against the government could put one in prison or worse.

Note: At first, the Tribunal followed a formalized legal procedure, but that gradually broke down. The accused were denied lawyers. Conviction based on patriotic “intuition” rather than evidence was allowed. In Paris, while some members of the upper classes were acquitted, the Tribunal sentenced 2,750 to death. In the countryside, the slow tribunals were replaced with ruthless commissions that killed an estimated 35,000 to 40,000 people. Many of these people were guillotined.

Document Analysis

1. Is this a primary or a secondary source?

2. What was the purpose of the Tribunal and how were the judges chosen?

3. What was the purpose of the watch committees?

4. What sorts of activities could get a person in trouble with the Committee of Public Safety?

5. How many people were executed by the commissions in the countryside?

6. Do you think the activities of the Tribunal and Committee of Public Safety were justified?
Document F

Source: Nine Émigrés go to the Guillotine in 1793, artist unknown, published in *La Guillotine en 1793*, by H Fleischman, 1908

Note: The guillotine became one of the powerful symbols of the French Revolution. Louis XVI, his wife Marie Antoinette, and even the key figure behind the Reign of Terror, Robespierre, all died by decapitation. The guillotine was regarded as a humane way to execute criminals. It had a sharp, angled blade, which dropped quickly on a guided track. Death was immediate. Historians estimate that 16,000 people were guillotined during the Reign of Terror.

Document Analysis

1. How many people were being executed on this occasion? Who were the people being executed?

2. Where are the executions taking place?

3. Describe the atmosphere.

4. Why was the guillotine regarded as a “humane” way to execute criminals?

5. How could you use this document to argue that the Reign of Terror was justified or not justified?
Document G

Source: Maximilien Robespierre, Report on the Principles of Public Morality, speech to the National Convention, February 5, 1794.

Note: Maximilien de Robespierre was perhaps the most famous French Revolutionary. Educated as a lawyer, he believed in Rousseau’s teaching that the right to govern comes from the people. Robespierre also held the belief that all people should be able to vote. He dreamed of making France a constitutional republic rather than a monarchy. He was one of the creators of the Reign of Terror.

Citizen-representatives of the people:

... In order to lay the foundations of democracy among us and to consolidate it, in order to arrive at the peaceful reign of constitutional law, we must finish the war of liberty against tyranny and safely cross through the storms of the revolution: that is the goal of the revolutionary system which you have put in order. You should therefore still base your conduct upon the stormy circumstances in which the republic finds itself....

Social protection is due only peaceful citizens; there are no citizens in the Republic but the republicans. The royalists, the conspirators are, in its eyes, only strangers or, rather, enemies.... Are not the enemies within the allies of those without?...

We must smother the internal and external enemies of the Republic or perish....

Document Analysis

1. According to Robespierre, what are the goals of the war and the revolution?

2. Whom should the government protect, according to Robespierre?

3. What does Robespierre mean by “internal” enemies and “external” enemies of the Republic? (Hint: Think about the other documents in this Mini-Q.)

4. What does Robespierre believe should be done to enemies of the Republic?

5. How could you use this document to argue that the Reign of Terror was justified or not justified?