

# The Reign of Terror



The period following Louis's execution became known as 'The Terror' in France. In the years 1793 – 1794, thousands of people suspected of anti-revolutionary activities or of helping France's enemies were sent to the guillotine. We need to look at the situation in France to understand why the reign of terror began. In January 1793, Louis was executed. In February, it was clear that the war was still going badly for France. And in March, there was a peasant revolt in Vendee, in the north-west. In August, the Jacobins declared that 'Terror is the order of the day'. By the late summer, many areas of France were rebelling against the new radical Jacobin government. Because of these threats to the stability of France, the Convention took emergency measures. It set up a Committee of Public Safety (source 1), which had twelve members. Measures such as setting up the Committee for Public Safety, were aimed at allowing the revolution to survive during a crisis. A fear of traitors had grown in France following revolution and war, and this led to another measure, revolutionary tribunals. (sources 2 and 3) The law was changed to try folk quickly.

## KEYWORDS

**JACOBIN** – radical sort of French revolutionary.

**TERROR** – emergency government set up in 1792 – 1794.

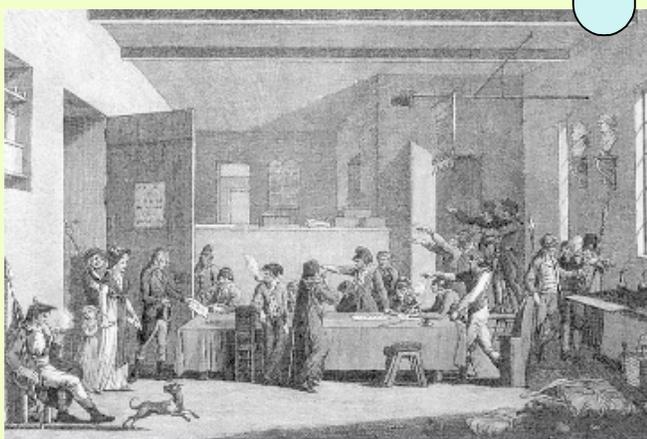
**GIRONDIN** – moderate sort of French revolutionary

**TRIBUNAL** – a hearing at court.

**SANS-CULOTTES** – urban workers who supported the revolution.

### Source 1: Decree by Convention, April 1793 on the Committee of Public Safety.

"The Committee shall talk in secret; it shall be responsible for watching over the work of the government...under the critical circumstances it is authorised to take measures to defend the revolution against internal and external enemies."



Source 2: A painting of a revolutionary tribunal.

### Source 3: Extract from a law introduced by the Committee for Public Safety, 17<sup>th</sup> September 1793, to deal with suspects brought to tribunals.

" Suspects shall be locked up.... The proof necessary to convict enemies...can be any kind of evidence....If proof already exists there need be no further witnesses....The penalty for all offences under the law of revolutionary tribunal is death."

Who was executed? One of the first to be executed was Marie-Antoinette, the former Queen. It is impossible to estimate how many people met their deaths. More than 12,000 were officially guillotined, but many others were shot, drowned, or put to death some other way. The Terror was supposed to help the revolution survive, but it was not just the former members of the first and second estates who suffered at its hands. Of the 12,000 or so who were guillotined, 1031 were Nobles; 2923 were from the middle classes; 674 were from the clergy; 7878 were workers & peasants; and 140 were of unknown classes. Some of those who faced tribunal were clearly treated in a most severe manner. Sources 4 and 5 show examples of individual cases where innocent French people were put to death un-necessarily.

## CASE FILE: The Terror

Source 4: From the Execution Record, 1793.

C) - Henriette Françoise Marboeuf, aged 55, convicted of having hoped for the arrival of the Austrians and Prussians and of keeping food for them, condemned to death and executed the same day.

D) - François Bertrand, aged 37, publican, convicted of having provided the defenders of the country with sour wine, condemned and executed the same day.

A) - Jean-Baptiste Henry, aged 18, journeyman tailor, convicted of having sawn down a tree of liberty, executed 6<sup>th</sup> September, 1793.

E) - Jean Julien, wagoner having been sentenced to twelve years hard labour, took it into his head to cry 'long live the king', brought back to the Tribunal and condemned to death.

B) - Marie Plaisant, seamstress, convicted of having exclaimed that she was an aristocrat and that she did not care a fig for the nation, condemned to death and executed the same day.

### Source 5: a description of the Terror at Bordeaux.

"A Woman was charged with the crime of having wept at her husband's execution...she was condemned to sit for hours under the blade which shed upon her, drop by drop the blood of her dead husband...before she was released by death..."

The Jacobins controlled the Committee of Public safety. The leading figure in the Committee was Maximilien Robespierre. (see the fact file) As you can see from source 4, the Committee allowed revolutionary tribunals to convict people without hearing evidence. This was called the Law of Prairial. In September 1793, the Convention passed a law called the Law of Suspects. People could now be put in prison without trial.

### The Terror continues...

There were many incidents of horror during the Terror. In Lyons, a Jacobin ordered 300 people to be executed by cannon fire as the guillotine was 'too slow'. At Nantes, barges containing 2000 people were towed into the middle of the River Loire and sunk. Everyone drowned. Birds hovered above the water, eating dead flesh. The river water was so contaminated that fishing was banned. In Paris, thousands watched the executions. Women took their knitting with them, bets were placed on the order the prisoners would be executed in.

Eventually, people got sick of all the killing, and by mid-1794, the Terror had died out. As the Austrian threat decreased, so too did the need for the emergency government. Many now looked for someone to blame for the Reign of Terror. The leading Jacobin, Robespierre found himself at the centre of the blame, despite acting on the wishes and with the backing of the Convention, and was arrested and locked up. In July 1794, Robespierre found himself facing the same fate as thousands of other French people, the guillotine.

### FACT FILE:

Maximilien Robespierre

1758 - Born in Arras.

1780s - Becomes a lawyer; defends poor folk.

1789-92 - Elected to Estates General, National Assembly, National Convention. Speaks out against slavery and death penalty. Becomes leading Jacobin member.

July 1793 - elected to Committee of Public Safety.

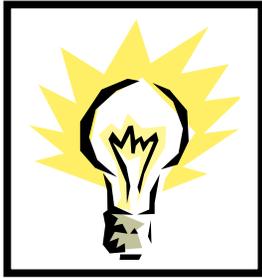
December 1793 - Suddenly comes out to support the Terror, after years of resisting members of the committee who wanted to intensify it.

1793-1794 - has many executed.

July 1794 - denounced and arrested by the Convention.

July 28<sup>th</sup> 1794 - Guillotined with 21 of his close supporters.



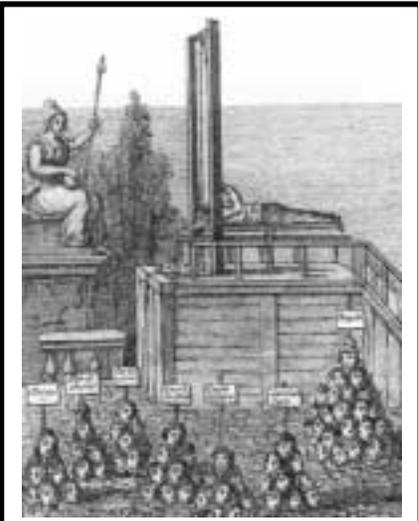


# Stuff to do

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Imagine you have been asked to say a few words about Robespierre at a remembrance service. Remember, you need to be respectful! No matter what you think of him, you need to write something that paints him in a positive light. Use the fact file on the worksheet to help you start, but you need to also think about what others have said or written about him. Look at the sources on this task sheet. What do they tell you about him? You should aim to write around 150 – 200 words.



a cartoon attacking the Terror. 'The government of Robespierre - he is even guillotining himself!'

"Robespierre is extremely touchy and suspicious" (mayor of Paris 1791)

"The bastard isn't satisfied with being the boss, he's got to be God as well" (a sans-culottes)

"Robespierre was bred a butcher.." (from the London Times)

"...dictatorship..he believed was the only way to stop the spread of evil." (Bertrand Barere 1832, he sat on the Committee with Robespierre)

"a depraved monster of small talent." (a government enquiry)

"..physically repulsive..humourless" (British newspaper, 1987)

He had been the equal of emperors and kings..he was the most hateful character in history" (Lord Acton, British historian, 1890s)

Robespierre: "One's duty is to punish traitors, to help the needy, respect the weak, defend the oppressed, do good to one's neighbour and behave justly." "Terror is nothing but quick and hard justice." " I detest the death penalty." "..in a revolution the state is at war, it doesn't have to follow all the laws."

- 1) Explain in a paragraph or two, what happened in France following the execution of King Louis.
- 2) What were the main causes of the 'Reign of Terror'?
- 3) Approximately what percentage of those guillotined were nobles and clergy?
- 4) Look at sources 1 – 5 and at the information on the Committee for Public Safety. Do you think the system of Tribunals in France was fair? Explain why, giving examples from each source.
- 5) Using sources 4 and 5, and the information on the Terror continuing, what examples of particular 'horrors' are there? Explain at least 3, in full.
- 6) How and why do you think the Terror came to an end?
- 7) Was Robespierre to blame for the Terror? Answer in a short paragraph, using the sources, the information and the fact file on Robespierre.