

Reign of Terror Textbook Excerpt

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, Maximilian Robespierre, 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 helped French citizens to remain true to the ideals of the Revolution. . .

Thousands of unknown people were also sent to their death, 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.

Source: *Modern World History: Patterns of Interaction*. Evanston, IL: McDougal Littell (2006), pp. 226-227.

Document A: Decree Against Profiteers (Modified)

In July 1793, faced with an angry and hungry population, the leaders of the Committee of Public Safety passed the “Decree Against Profiteers.” The law accused “profiteers” in the countryside of hoarding or monopolizing grain in order to raise the price of bread.

26 July 1793

1. Monopoly is a capital crime.
2. Those who keep out of circulation essential merchandise or commodities without offering them for sale daily and publicly are declared guilty of monopoly . . .
3. The essential commodities and merchandise are: bread, meat, wine, grain, flour, vegetables, fruit, butter, vinegar, cider, brandy, charcoal, tallow, wood, oil, soda, soap, salt, [etc.]
4. Those who have any of these commodities shall be required to declare them and sell them . . .
5. One week from today, those who have not declared their goods shall be considered monopolists, and, as such, punished with death; their property shall be confiscated, and their commodities or merchandise shall be placed on sale.
6. Those convicted of making false declarations likewise shall be punished with death. Public officials who protect monopolists shall also be punished with death.

Vocabulary

capital: punishable by death

decree: an official order

monopoly: total control over something

municipality: local government

commodities: things that can be bought or sold

Source: Excerpt from *Decree Against Profiteers*, passed July 1793.

Document B: Law of Suspects (Modified)

By September 1793, the leaders of the Committee of Public Safety faced growing counter-revolutionary uprisings and mounting fear of foreign invasion. They responded by passing the Law of Suspects, which established revolutionary courts to try anyone suspected of treason against the revolution.

- 1 Immediately after the publication of the present decree, all suspected persons within the territory of the Republic and still at liberty shall be placed in custody.
2. The following are deemed suspected persons:
 - 1st, those who, by their conduct, associations, talk, or writings have shown themselves to be enemies of liberty
 - 2nd, those who are unable to justify their means of existence and the performance of their civic duties
 - 3rd, those to whom certificates of patriotism have been refused
 - 4th, public officials suspended or dismissed from their positions by the National Convention or by its commissioners and not reinstated
 - 5th, those former nobles, husbands, wives, fathers, mothers, sons or daughters, brothers or sisters of émigrés, who have not steadily demonstrated their devotion to the Revolution

Vocabulary

certificates of patriotism: proof of patriotism required to serve in military
émigrés: people who leave their own country to settle in another, usually for political reasons

Source: *Excerpt from Law of Suspects*, passed September 1793.