

Reign of Terror Lesson Plan

Central Historical Question:

Was the main goal of the Committee of Public Safety to “protect the Revolution from its enemies”?

Materials:

- Copies of Timeline – Key Events of the French Revolution
- Copies of Reign of Terror Textbook Excerpt
- Copies of Documents A and B
- Copies of Reign of Terror Guiding Questions

Plan of Instruction:

[NOTE: This lesson focuses on the Reign of Terror, the radical phase of the French Revolution that began in 1793. Students should be familiar with the general events of the French Revolution before participating in this lesson.]

1. Introduction: Hand out French Revolution Timeline. Read the paragraph on top together as a class. Use the timeline to review key events of the French Revolution leading up to the Reign of Terror. As you review these key events, you may want to emphasize the following:

[Note: The timeline attempts to illustrate the increasing radicalization of the revolution between 1789 and 1792 by depicting the various governments that preceded the Committee of Public Safety. The main takeaway for students is that many people vied for power during the revolution; it was not a single, monolithic effort. The timeline does NOT attempt to tell the story of the Revolution, and in fact, does not include key events, such as the September Massacres, the king’s attempt to flee, etc.].

- The French Revolution began in 1789 (students should be familiar with the grievances of the Third Estate, storming of the Bastille, *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen*).
- Students should understand that the first phase of the French Revolution abolished the system of feudalism.
- When the Legislative Assembly was established in 1791, the king was still the symbolic leader, and property ownership was required for voting. In other words, poor people could not vote.
- When the Jacobins (the more radical political organization) took over and established the National Convention, the monarchy was completely abolished (Louis XVI was eventually executed), and everyone could vote.
- The Committee of Public Safety, headed by Robespierre, took over the National Convention. The Committee of Public Safety claimed

that their goal was to make sure that the enemies of the French Revolution (rich people both abroad and within France) did not roll back the gains that had been achieved during the Revolution.

- Today, students will explore the motives of the Committee of Public Safety and examine the question:

Was the main goal of the Committee of Public Safety to “protect the Revolution from its enemies”?

2. Hand out Reign of Terror Textbook Excerpt and have students read and complete guiding questions.
3. Review student answers to questions.
 - Question 2 might be tricky: the Jacobins would have wanted to wipe out the past because they saw the Revolution as the dawn of a new age based on reason, and they rejected religion and superstition.
 - Question 3 is essential for students to understand. Be sure to review the slogan: Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.
 - Students will probably say that the Committee of Public Safety did not protect the ideals of the Revolution because the textbook gives examples that seem random (eliminating the calendar) and evil (killing tens of thousands).
4. Hand out Document A (Decree Against Profiteers) and have students complete guiding questions. Review student answers:
 - Students should recognize that the Decree was passed to prevent price gouging (if students are unfamiliar with this economic concept, you should explain).
 - Students should also recognize that such behavior would be seen as especially egregious in light of the ideals of the Revolution.
 - It is possible, therefore, that some students will say that the Decree Against Profiteers supports the argument that the Committee of Public Safety was, indeed, protecting the Revolution from its enemies.
5. Hand out Document B (Law of Suspects) and have students complete guiding questions. Review student answers:
 - For Question 2, it’s important that students try to imagine why such people would have been considered threatening to the Committee of Public Safety. You might engage students in discussion of the following question: *Just because someone was an enemy of the*

Committee of Public Safety, does it mean that person was against the French Revolution in general?

- Students should recognize that the Committee of Public Safety believed it was protecting the ideals of the Revolution.
- Students will likely say that the Law of Suspects does not support the claim that the Committee of Public Safety protected the ideals of the Revolution from enemies. They will likely see the list of potential suspects as overreaching and not necessarily comprised of people who would pose a threat to the ideals of the Revolution.

6. Individual work: Students write a paragraph in response to the final prompt.
7. If time allows, ask students to share their responses.

Citations:

Decree Against Profiteers: Stewart, J.H. (1951). *A Documentary survey of the French Revolution*, 469–71. New York: Macmillan. Retrieved October 5, 2012, from: <http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/414/>

Law of Suspects: Duvergier, J-B. (1793). *Collection complète des lois, décrets, ordonnances, règlements, avis du conseil d'état . . . de 1788 a 1830 . . .*, 2d ed., 110 vols. Paris. 6:172–73. Retrieved October 5, 2012, from: <http://sourcebook.fitchburgstate.edu/history/lawofsuspects.html>

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

Timeline - Key Events of the French Revolution (1789-1794)

Over four years after the start of the French Revolution, France descended into a period commonly known as the “Reign of Terror,” when over 16,000 people were executed for allegedly opposing the Revolution. The Reign of Terror began when the Committee of Public Safety took over the National Convention, the third government that had been established since the start of the French Revolution. The timeline below lists the governments and major reforms that were established under each.

Name of Government	Year	Reforms
National Assembly	1789	Storming of the Bastille End of feudalism <i>Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen</i>
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Legislative Assembly	1791	Constitutional monarchy with king as symbolic ruler
	July 1792	Property requirements for voting Prussia and Austria begin invading France
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National Convention	Sept. 1792	Jacobins take control Constitutional monarchy abolished France becomes a republic with universal suffrage
	January 1793	King Louis XVI executed
Reign of Terror	July 1793	Decree Against Profiteers (Document A)
	September 1793	Law of Suspects (Document B)
	July 1794	Robespierre, leader of the Reign of Terror, executed
	↓	Reign of Terror ends

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.

Reign of Terror Guiding Questions

Textbook Excerpt

1. According to the textbook, why did the Jacobins have so many enemies?
2. Robespierre and his supporters created a new calendar. Why would they want to wipe out “every trace of France’s past?”
3. According to the textbook, Robespierre believed terror helped French citizens remain “true to the ideals of the Revolution.” What were the ideals of the French Revolution? (Use what you already know about the French Revolution to answer this question).

Based on the textbook excerpt, do you think the Committee of Public Safety protected the Revolution from its enemies? Circle one:

YES NO

Explain your answer.

Document B: Law of Suspects

1. What was the goal of the Law of suspects?
2. (Close reading) List two examples of people who would have been considered suspects. Explain why the Committee of Public Safety would have considered them suspects.
3. What might the leaders of the Committee of Public Safety have said to justify this law?

Based on the Law of Suspects, do you think the Committee of Public Safety protected the Revolution from its enemies? Circle one:

YES NO

Explain your answer.

The Committee of Public Safety was established to protect the Revolution from its enemies. Based on the Decree Against Profiteers and the Law of Suspects, do you think the Committee of Public Safety actually protected the Revolution from its enemies?

Write a paragraph in the space below, using evidence from the documents to support your claims.

