

Reign of Terror



Maximilien Robespierre

"Terror is nothing other than justice, prompt, severe, inflexible"

After the death of Louis XVI in 1793, the Reign of Terror began. The first victim was Marie Antoinette. She had been imprisoned with her children after she was separated from Louis. First they took her son Louis Charles from her (often called the lost dauphin, or Louis XVII). He disappeared under suspicious circumstances. Then she led off a parade of prominent and not-so-prominent citizens to their deaths. The guillotine, the new instrument of egalitarian justice, was put to work. Public executions were considered educational. Women were encouraged to sit and knit during trials and executions. The Revolutionary Tribunal ordered the execution of 2,400 people in Paris by July 1794. Across France

30,000 people lost their lives.

The Terror was designed to fight the enemies of the revolution, to prevent counter-revolution from gaining ground. Most of the people rounded up were not aristocrats, but ordinary people. A man (and his family) might go to the guillotine for saying something critical of the revolutionary government. If an informer happened to overhear, that was all the tribunal needed. Watch Committees around the nation were encouraged to arrest "suspected persons, ... those who, either by their conduct or their relationships, by their remarks or by their writing, are shown to be partisans of tyranny and federalism and enemies of liberty" (Law of Suspects, 1793). Civil liberties were suspended. The Convention ordered that "if material or moral proof exists, independently of the evidence of witnesses, the latter will not be heard, unless this formality should appear necessary, either to discover accomplices or for other important reasons concerning the public interest." The promises of the Declaration of the Rights of Man were forgotten. Terror was the order of the day. In the words of Maximilien Robespierre, "Softness to traitors will destroy us all."

Robespierre was the mastermind of the Reign of Terror. He was the leader of the Committee of Public Safety, the executive committee of the National Convention, and the most powerful man in France. He explained how terror would lead to the Republic of Virtue in a speech to the National Convention:

If the spring of popular government in time of peace is virtue, the springs of popular government in revolution are at once *virtue and terror*: virtue, without which terror is fatal; terror, without which virtue is powerless. Terror is nothing other than justice, prompt, severe, inflexible...It has been said that terror is the principle of despotic government. Does your government therefore resemble despotism? Yes, as the sword that gleams in the hands of the heroes of liberty resembles that with which the henchmen of tyranny are armed. Maximilien Robespierre Speech on the Justification of the Use of Terror

The old maxim "the end justifies the means" describes Robespierre's policy well.

Even the radical Jacobins, the supporters of Robespierre, come to feel that the Terror must be stopped. Danton rose in the Convention calling for an end to the Terror. He was its next victim. Fearful of Danton's reputation for eloquence, the Convention passed a decree stating that any accused person who insulted the court should be prohibited from speaking in his own defense. Danton was not allowed to speak in his own defense. Nevertheless after the trial Danton asserted that "the people will tear my enemies to pieces within 3 months." As he was led to the guillotine he remarked "Above all, don't forget to show my head to the people - it's well worth having a look at." Modesty was never one of his virtues.

When Robespierre called for a new purge in 1794, he seemed to threaten the other members of the Committee of Public Safety. The Jacobins had had enough. Cambon rose in the Convention and said "It is time to tell the whole truth. One man alone is paralyzing the will of the Convention. *And that man is Robespierre.*" Others quickly rallied to his support. Robespierre was arrested and sent to the guillotine the next day, the last victim of the Reign of Terror.