**The Terror Grips France**

The Jacobins had thousands of enemies within France itself—peasants who were horrified by the beheading of the king, 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.

As dozens of leaders struggled for power, Maximilien Robespierre slowly gathered control into his own hands. Robespierre and his supporters set out to build a “republic of virtue.” They tried to wipe out every trace of France’s past monarchy and nobility. Many families named Leroy (“king”), for instance, changed their names to something less political. No household item was too small to escape the influence of Robespierre—even the kings, queens, and jacks in decks of cards were changed to figures that represented revolutionary ideals.

Firm believers in reason, the radicals changed the calendar to be more scientific. They divided the year into 12 months of 30 days and renamed each month. The new calendar had no Sundays because the radicals considered religion old-fashioned and dangerous. They even closed all churches in Paris, and towns all over France soon did the same.

In the summer of 1793, Robespierre became the leader of the Committee of Public Safety. As head of the committee, he decided who should be considered enemies of the republic. The committee often had people tried in the morning and guillotined the same afternoon. From July 1793 to July 1794, Robespierre governed France nearly as a dictator, and the period of his rule became known as the Reign of Terror. In his speeches, Robespierre justified the Reign of Terror, explaining that it enabled French citizens to remain true to the ideals of the Revolution.

14. Who emerged as a leader of the Jacobins?

a.

15. Why did Jacobin leaders remove Sunday from their new calendar?

a.

16. Why did the Committee of Public Safety execute so many people?

a.

17. How did Robespierre justify the Reign of Terror to the people of France?

a.

The most famous victim of the Terror was the widowed queen, Marie Antoinette. Calm and dignified, she rode in the death cart past jeering crowds. On the scaffold, she accidentally stepped on her executioner’s foot. “Monsieur,” she apologized, “I beg your pardon. I did not do it on purpose.” Those were her last words. The “enemies of the republic” who troubled Robespierre the most were fellow revolutionaries who challenged his leadership. In October 1793, revolutionary courts pronounced death sentences on many of the leaders who had first helped set up the republic. Their only crime was that they were less radical than Robespierre.

By the beginning of 1794, even Georges Danton found himself in danger. (Marat had already been stabbed to death by a young woman.) Danton’s friends in the National Convention, afraid to defend him, joined in condemning him to death. On the scaffold, he told the executioner, “Don’t forget to show my head to the people. It’s well worth seeing.”

Besides leading political figures, thousands of unknown people were sent to death on the flimsiest of charges. A revolutionary court sentenced an 18-year-old youth to die by the guillotine for sawing down a tree that had been planted as a symbol of liberty. A tavern keeper was executed because he sold sour wine “to the defenders of the country.”

During the Terror, approximately 3,000 people were executed in Paris. Some historians believe that as many as 40,000 were killed all together. About 85 percent were peasants or members of the urban poor or middle class—common people for whose benefit the Revolution had supposedly been carried out.

18. Why was this time period known as the Reign of Terror?

a.

19. How many people do historians believe were killed during this time period?

a.