

AIM: How did the French Revolution lead to a Reign of Terror in its “Radical Phase” (1793-1794)?

DO NOW: The terms we use today to describe where people stand politically come from the factions that developed in France’s Legislative Assembly in 1791. Using the paragraph below, draw an arrow in your notebook that illustrates the views of radicals, moderates, and conservatives.

People who want extreme changes in government (radicals) are called left wing or are said to be on the left. People with moderate views (centrists, or moderates) are said to be in the center. People who want few or no changes in government (conservatives) are called right wing or are said to be on the right.

← **Left** **Center** **Right** →

Q1: What type of government did French radicals want in 1791? What did conservatives want?

Despite the new government, food shortages and government debt remained. The question of how to handle these problems caused the new Legislative Assembly to split into three general groups. Radicals opposed the idea of a monarchy and wanted sweeping changes in the way the government was run. Moderates wanted some changes in government, but not as many as the radicals. Conservatives upheld the idea of a limited monarchy and wanted few changes in government.



Q2: Who were the Jacobins? How did they change the government?

In 1792, France faced serious trouble on its borders. Prussia and Austria feared that the French Revolution would spread to their lands. They wanted to use force to restore control to Louis XVI. Soon France found itself at war—a war it quickly began to lose. A powerful extremist group called the **Jacobins** convinced the French people that King Louis XVI had plotted with Austria and Prussia to overthrow the revolution. The Jacobins took control of the government, ended the monarchy, and declared France a republic. The new government found the King Louis XVI guilty of treason and sentenced him to death. On January 21, 1793, the former king walked with calm dignity up the steps of the scaffold to be beheaded by a machine called the **guillotine**.

Q3: What action did the new government take to help France in the war? Did it work?

Early in 1793, Great Britain, Holland, and Spain joined Prussia and Austria against France. To reinforce the French army, Jacobin leaders in the Convention took an extreme step. At their urging, in February 1793 the Convention ordered a draft of 300,000 French citizens between the ages of 18 and 40. By 1794, the army had grown to 800,000 and included women. Patriotism was stirred by a song called “The Marseillaise,” which became the French national anthem. The people stood together to save France from its enemies. By 1795, French armies had not only defended the nation but had also conquered parts of the Netherlands, Belgium, and Germany.



Q4: How did Robespierre change France? Why did he make these changes?

In the early months of 1793, one Jacobin leader, **Maximilien 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. They changed the calendar by renaming each month and eliminating 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.

The Jacobins had thousands of enemies within France. 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. For over a year, Robespierre governed France virtually as a dictator, and the period of his rule became known as the **Reign of Terror**. Thousands of people were sent to their deaths for being “enemies of the Revolution.” Some of these were fellow radicals who challenged Robespierre’s leadership. Others were unknown people sent to their deaths 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.



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Q: How did Robespierre justify his use of terror?

The first maxim of our politics ought to be to lead the people by means of reason and the enemies of the people by terror. If the basis of popular government in time of peace is virtue, the basis of popular government in time of revolution is both virtue and terror: virtue without which terror is murderous, terror without which virtue is powerless. Terror is nothing else than swift, severe, indomitable justice; it flows, then, from virtue. - MAXIMILIEN ROBESPIERRE (1794)

Q5: How did Robespierre’s Reign of Terror come to an end? What type of government replaced him?

In July 1794, fearing for their own safety, some members of the National Convention turned on Robespierre, demanded his arrest and execution. The Reign of Terror ended on July 28, 1794, when Robespierre went to the guillotine. In 1795, moderate leaders in the National Convention drafted a new plan of government which called for a two-house legislature and an executive body of five men, known as the Directory. These five were moderates, not revolutionary idealists. Some of them were corrupt and made themselves rich at the country’s expense. Even so, they gave their troubled country a period of order. They also found the right general to command France’s armies—Napoleon Bonaparte.

