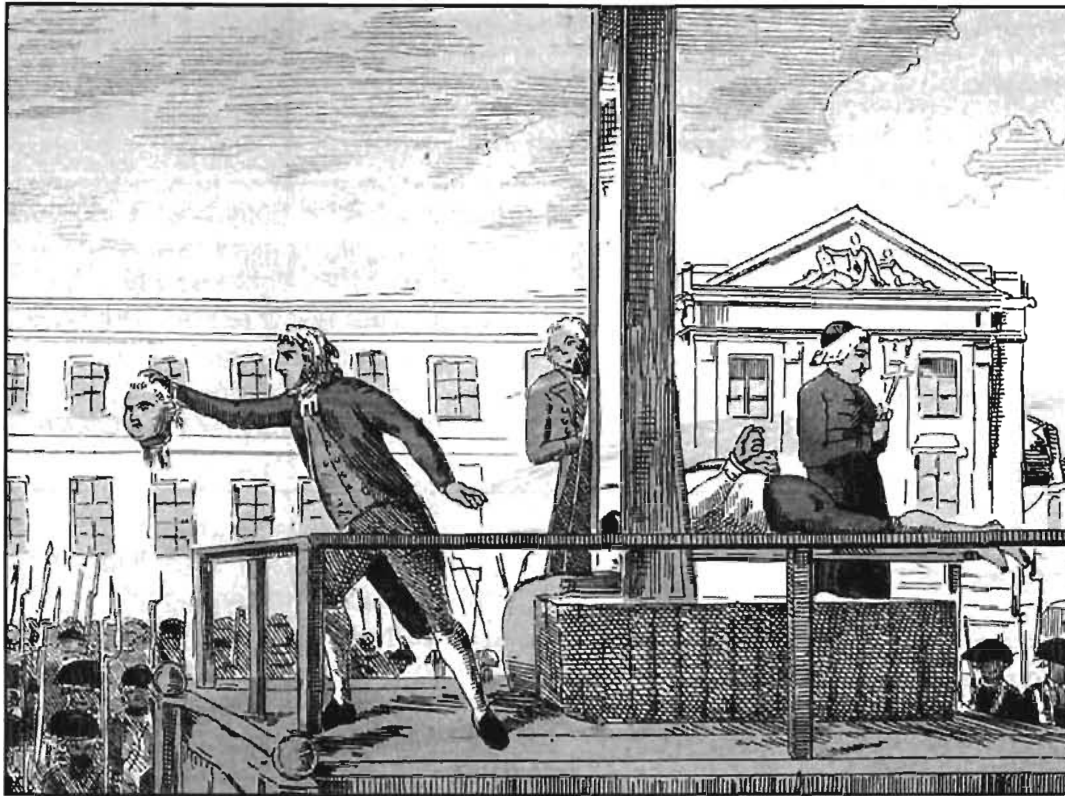


The Reign of Terror: Was It Justified?

EV



Overview: The French Revolution began in 1789 as an attempt to form a new government in France. It was a revolution that did not follow a simple path. One broadside (poster) from the time read, “Unity, Indivisibility of the Republic, Liberty, Equality, Fraternity or Death.” It is the last word, of course, that is troubling. This Mini-Q asks you to consider the revolutionary values expressed above, and the means used by the French revolutionary government to put those values in place.

The Documents:

- Document A: Timeline of the Reign of Terror
- Document B: The External Threat (map)
- Document C: The Internal Threat (map)
- Document D: Letter from the Vendée
- Document E: The Committee of Public Safety
- Document F: The Guillotine (image)
- Document G: Robespierre, “Report on the Principles of Public Morality”

A Mini Document Based Question (Mini-Q)

Hook Exercise: Reign of Terror

The individual or the society: whose needs are more important? Whenever people live together in a small community or a large nation, some compromise is needed between the needs of one versus the needs of the group.

Consider each of the following situations. With a partner, decide whose needs are more important, the individual's or the group's. Check the box that matches your position and be ready to discuss with the class.

EV

Scenario	Individual Is More Important	Group Is More Important	Reason
An air traveler going through security is required to take off her shoes, put toiletries in plastic bags, and submit to a random full-body scan by a female security officer.	☐	☐	
A high school wrestler is required to take a urine test before his state tournament match to see whether he has been taking drugs.	☐	☐	
A war protester is arrested and taken to jail for refusing to leave a public park after curfew.	☐	☐	
The government deports a law-abiding high school student who has lived illegally in the United States since the age of two.	☐	☐	
A principal refuses to allow publication of a student's controversial article in the school newspaper.	☐	☐	

The Reign of Terror: Was it Justified?

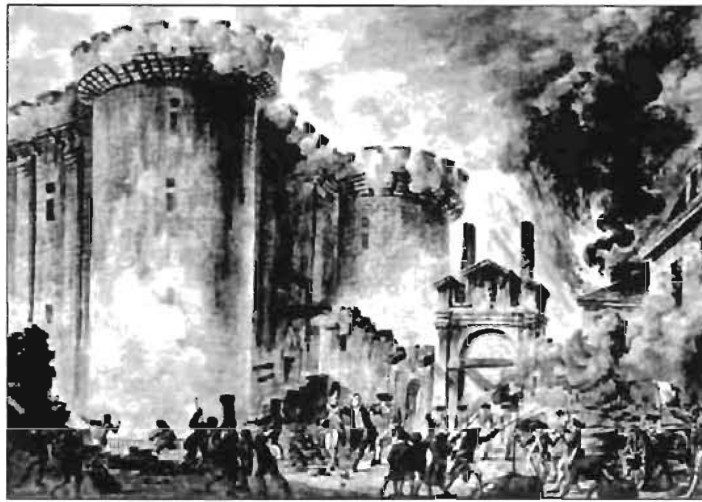
In 1789 the French Revolution upset a centuries-old French appletart. In the eyes of many, however, the appletart needed upsetting. For years, **absolute monarchs** had ruled the French nation with little consideration for the majority of the people. The king, Louis XVI, was having his troubles. France was in serious debt because of expensive wars in Europe. France had worsened her debt by helping America fight the British overseas. Meanwhile, at home, poor people were starving. The price of bread had skyrocketed because bad weather had devastated the grain harvest. Making matters still worse was a confusing and unfair tax system. To his credit, Louis sought the advice of nobles, church officials, and even commoners, but the problems just grew.

When Louis XVI called the **Estates General**, an assembly of 1,200 men, to help solve the financial crisis, he unleashed change he could not control. On June 20, 1789, a powerful group of men walked out of the Estates General and vowed to create a new Constitution. Three weeks later, mobs of Parisians stormed an old fortress called the Bastille and stole weapons that would later be used against the royal government forces. On August 26, the new revolutionary government signed a document called the *Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen* which ensured “Liberty, Equality, and **Fraternity**” for the people of France. Half the adult male population was given the right to vote, reducing the power of the king and the nobles while giving new powers to the common people.

Not everyone loved the reforms. The nobility and the Catholic Church were unhappy because they lost a chunk of their property and power. Monarchs in neighboring countries like England,

Austria, and Prussia were unhappy because they feared a spread of the revolution. Some peasants in the French countryside were unhappy about having to fight in the foreign wars. To deal with this opposition, the French revolution became more **radical**. Led by a chief prosecutor named Maximilien Robespierre, the king was found guilty of crimes against the state and **guillotined** in a public square on January 21, 1793. His wife, Marie Antoinette, was executed nine months later.

The execution of Louis XVI marked the



Storming of the Bastille, July 14, 1789

beginning of an 18-month period of the French Revolution that has come to be called “**The Reign of Terror.**” Led by Robespierre, the new government proceeded to execute large numbers of individuals whom it considered to be enemies of the revolution. Among

its targets were the Catholic Church, which they regarded as the old order, and peasant rebels. At the same time, international tensions escalated into war. The new government had to do battle both inside and outside the country.

In mid-1794 the Reign of Terror came to a rather abrupt end. Robespierre himself was executed and a more **conservative** government was put in place. Within five years Napoleon would take control.

But our focus is on the Reign of Terror. This Mini-Q asks you to consider how far a people and a government should go to preserve their vision of liberty and equality. In 1793 and 1794, were conditions in France serious enough to require such a violent response by the revolutionary government? In other words, *The Reign of Terror: Was it justified?*

Background Essay Questions

1. Who was the absolute monarch of France in 1789?
2. What were three serious problems that faced Louis XVI in the 1780s?
3. In what year did the French Revolution begin? Was this shortly before or shortly after the American Revolution?
4. In August 1789 what three words became the rallying cry of the French Revolution?
5. Why were members of the French nobility and the French Catholic Church upset about the revolution?
6. Who became leader of the radical wing of the revolutionary government?
7. Define these terms:

absolute monarch

Estates General

fraternity

radical

guillotine

Reign of Terror

conservative

Timeline

1762 – Rousseau writes *The Social Contract*.

1776 – United States declare independence.

1789 – Storming of the Bastille in Paris. Symbol of the French Revolution.

1789 – United States Constitution is ratified.

1791 – Slave Revolt in the French colony of Saint Domingue, now known as Haiti.

1793 – 1794 – Reign of Terror in France.

1799 – Napoleon becomes virtual dictator of France.

Document A

Source: Various sources.

Timeline of the Reign of Terror

1789	July	Beginning of the French Revolution. King Louis XVI is forced to share power.
1791	August	Austria and Prussia form an alliance to stop the French Revolution.
1792	August 19	Revolution grows more radical. Louis XVI is imprisoned.
	September	Constitutional monarchy ends. Replaced by a republican government. War with Prussia and Austria begins. Louis escapes, flees with family, is caught and imprisoned again.
1793	January 21	Robespierre presides over the guillotining of Louis XVI.
	March–April	Tribunal and Committee of Public Safety is created to fight “enemies of the revolution.”
	April	Counterrevolutionary revolts break out inside France.
	August	Levée en Masse (forced military draft for all French males) fuels revolts.
	November	Festival of Reason. Christian churches are soon closed by revolutionary government.
	December	Committee of Public Safety cracks down on rebels. Counterrevolution in western France is near collapse.
1794	February	All slavery abolished in the French colonies.
	April / May	French victory over foreign enemies is nearly complete.
	June	Government denies legal counsel to accused enemies of the revolution. The number of government executions sharply increases. Two-thirds of all executions during the Reign of Terror occur in June and July of 1794.
	July	Radical leader Robespierre is executed by guillotine. Many government policies of last two years will soon end. The Reign of Terror is declared over.

Document Analysis

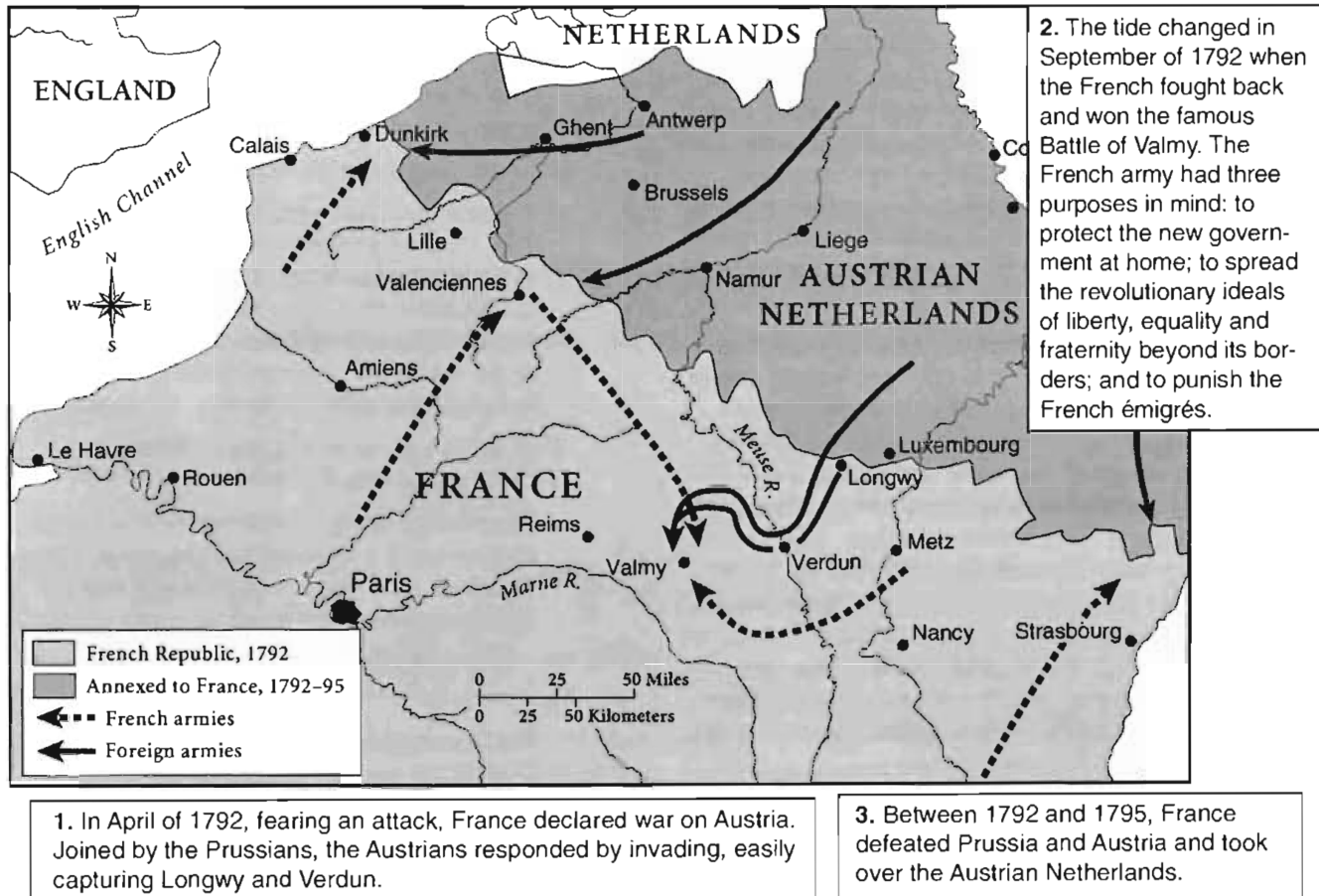
1. For nearly two years, France was a constitutional monarchy. What kind of government is that?
2. How many months was it between the guillotining of Louis XVI and the guillotining of Robespierre?
3. Why did the revolutionary government in Paris need a military draft in 1793?
4. What evidence is there that the revolutionary government that supported the Reign of Terror also supported human rights? What evidence is there that the government that supported the Reign of Terror denied civil rights?
5. What evidence is there that the Reign of Terror was successful in fighting both enemies inside France (counterrevolutionaries) and foreign enemies?

Document B

Source: Map created from various sources.

Note: In August 1792, an 80,000-man army marched into France. Nearly half the force was Prussian, and the other half Austrian. Austria and Prussia were monarchies and both were afraid that revolution might spread to their countries. Austria was also concerned about the safety of Louis XVI's wife, Queen Marie Antoinette, who was a daughter in the Austrian royal family. Nearly 10,000 French army officers and aristocrats had also moved to the Austrian-controlled Netherlands. These émigrés formed armies and allied themselves with France's foreign enemies.

EV



Document Analysis

1. With which countries was France at war in 1792 and 1793?
2. Which major cities did the French lose in 1792?
3. Why was Austria so concerned about the possible spread of the French Revolution?
4. How did émigrés threaten France?
5. Based on this document, do you think executing French supporters of the Austrian and Prussian monarchies was justified? Explain.

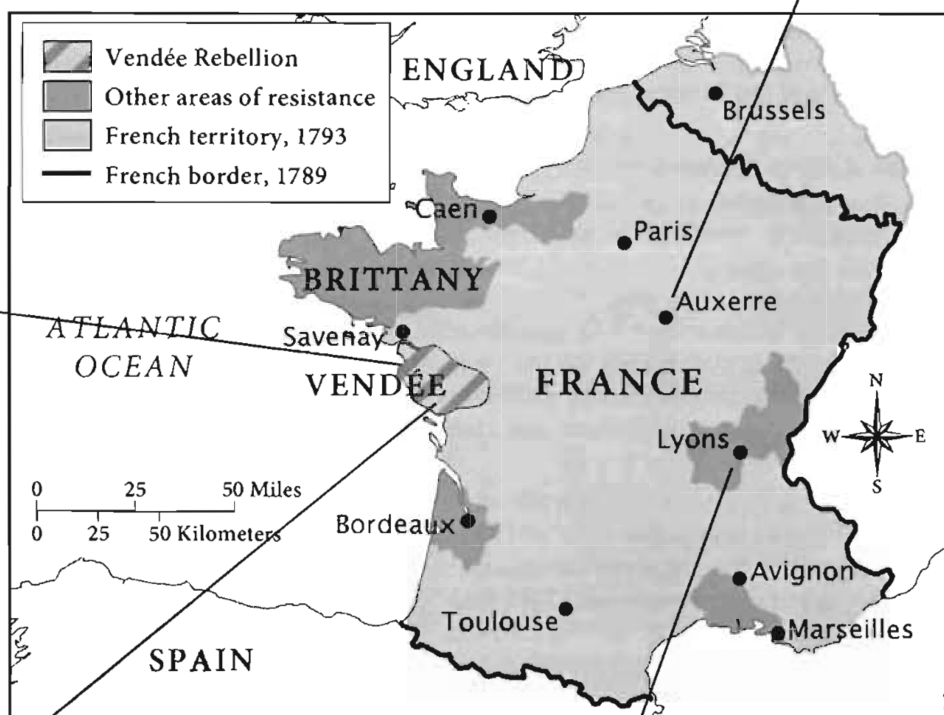
Document C

Source: Map created from various sources.

Note: The map below shows areas of the highest resistance to the revolutionary government. These counter-revolutionaries included some members of the aristocracy, priests, farmers, and townspeople. They were a mixed lot of French men and women whom the revolutionary government regarded as thieves or rabble (lower class mob).

In 1793, a revolutionary campaign was launched against the Catholic Church. Sunday worship, Christmas, and Easter were abolished. A church official wrote that in Auxerre, France government representatives "took a copper crucifix which was on the altar, . . . [and] carried it mockingly, upside down on a cart, offering it to passers-by to spit on."

The Vendée region was the hub of the counterrevolution. People here fiercely fought against the military draft called the *levée en masse* and against laws that tried to abolish Christianity in France.



Historians estimate that anywhere between 80,000 and 500,000 French people on both sides died in the Vendée in 1793.

In October 1793, Revolutionaries decided to make an example of counterrevolutionaries in Lyons. On one day, revolutionaries destroyed 1600 homes and chopped off 12 heads in five minutes.

Document Analysis

1. What do the shaded areas represent on this map?
2. What was the *levée en masse*?
3. What did the government do to religious property in Auxerre, France?
4. Why do you think so many people in the Vendée were killed in 1793?
5. How could you use this document to prove that the Terror was justified or not justified?

Document D

Source: Letter from the Vendée, 1793.

Note: This letter was sent to the National Convention (the revolutionary government in Paris) by a local government official in western France. At this time, counterrevolutionary activity had been increasing for more than a year. This official is reporting that soldiers already sent by the government have failed to stop the “rabble” and he is writing for more help. To make matters even more unsettling, Prussians were invading at the same time from the north.

EV

(Town of) Niort, 25 August, 1793, Year IV of Freedom

The departmental adviser reported to you, in the last mail, the troubling events which occurred in the district of Châtillon. New information shows us that the crowd is continuing to gather.... The council meanwhile has taken strong measures, and at this moment there are three thousand national guardsmen in the region to establish order. It is with the greatest of sorrow that we inform you that six patriots have already fallen victim to this rabble, but at least forty of their number were killed.

We had reason to hope that these gatherings would cease as soon as the public troops arrived. Our hopes were misguided, and this causes us the greatest of worries. Having already

dispatched all of the armed force that was at our disposal, the departments of the Vendée (and others) showed us ... their fraternity and neighborliness by coming to our aid during these circumstances. Without these departments, this unfortunate region would today have fallen to the rebels. . . .

We can not hide from you, sirs, that a severe and swift example needs to be set. Already several of these bandits have been arrested, and the departmental adviser requests that you issue a decree whereby the criminal court of Niort judges this case as the last resort.* It is the only way to bring peace back to this unfortunate region. We hope that you will not refuse us this request.

*Judgment of last resort: the local court has final say. There can be no appeal, even for a death by guillotine conviction.

Document Analysis

1. When was this letter written?
2. Who wrote the letter and to whom?
3. What is the purpose of the letter?
4. Is there any evidence in the document that helps you measure the size of the revolt? Explain.
5. How can you use the document to argue that the Reign of Terror was justified or not justified?

Document E

Source: Steven Otfinoski, *Triumph and Terror: The French Revolution*, 1993.

[In March 1793] the revolutionary Tribunal (a court of justice) was established to try all crimes against the state. Tribunal members would not be elected by the people, but appointed by the National Convention (the revolutionary government) and their power would be absolute. Watch committees were set up in every neighborhood to ferret out and expel any foreigners suspected of counterrevolutionary activities. On April 6, 1793, [the National Convention established] the Committee of Public Safety.... The purpose was to “protect the public safety” from enemies both in and outside of France. The Committee soon employed a shadowy network of informers and spies to achieve these ends. No one was safe from suspicion. A careless word of criticism spoken against the government could put one in prison or worse.

EV

Note: At first, the Tribunal followed a formalized legal procedure, but that gradually broke down. The accused were denied lawyers. Conviction based on patriotic “intuition” rather than evidence was allowed. In Paris, while some members of the upper classes were acquitted, the Tribunal sentenced 2,750 to death. In the countryside, the slow tribunals were replaced with ruthless commissions that killed an estimated 35,000 to 40,000 people. Many of these people were guillotined.

Document Analysis

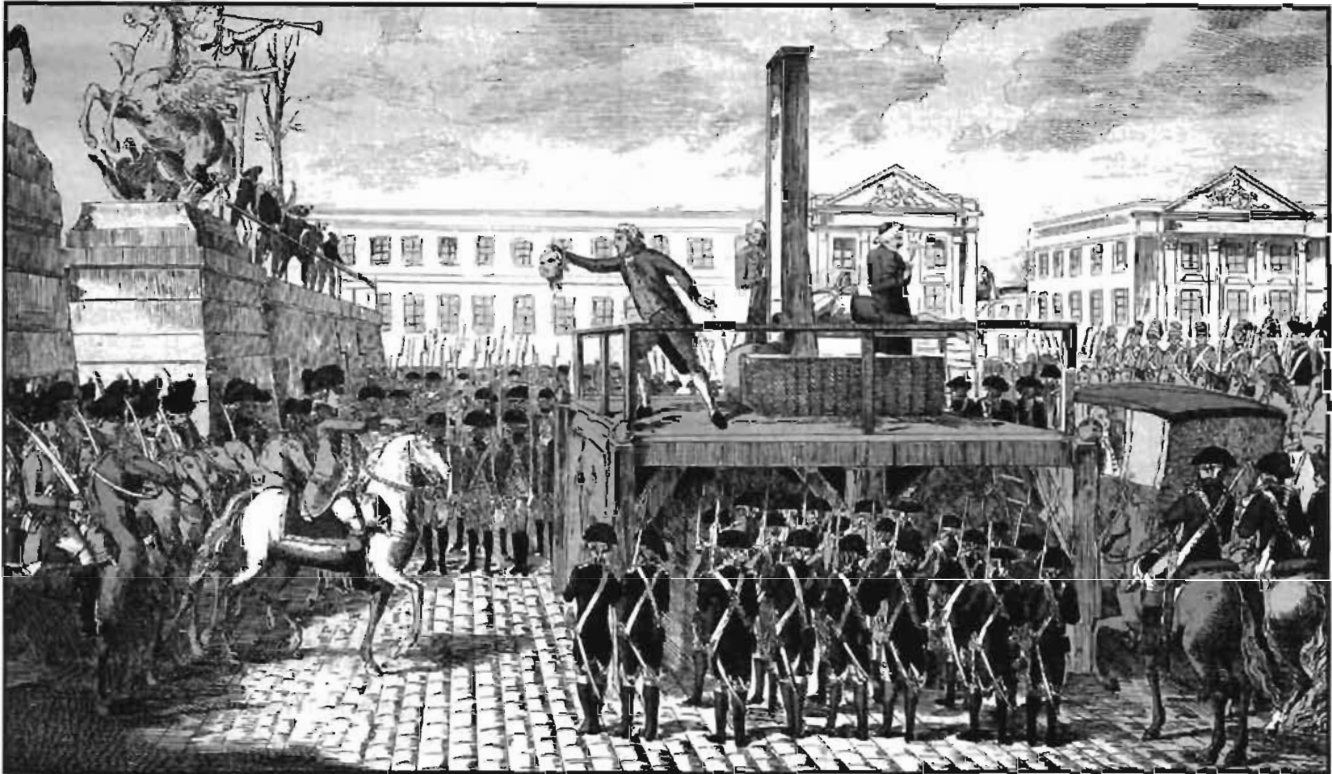
1. Is this a primary or a secondary source?
2. What was the purpose of the Tribunal and how were the judges chosen?
3. What was the purpose of the watch committees?
4. What sorts of activities could get a person in trouble with the Committee of Public Safety?
5. How many people were executed by the commissions in the countryside?
6. Do you think the activities of the Tribunal and Committee of Public Safety were justified?

Document F

Source: Death of King Louis XVI on 21st of January 1793. Engraving by Faucher-Gudin, 19th century.

Note: The guillotine became one of the powerful symbols of the French Revolution. Louis XVI, his wife Marie Antoinette, and even the key figure behind the Reign of Terror, Robespierre, all died by decapitation. The guillotine was regarded as a humane way to execute criminals. It had a sharp, angled blade, which dropped quickly on a guided track. Historians estimate that between 20,000 and 40,000 people were killed by the guillotine during the Reign of Terror. The public guillotining was memorable events. One observer who attended Louis's beheading wrote, "[The king's] blood flowed and cries of joy from eighty thousand armed men struck my ears . . . I saw people pass by arm in arm, laughing and chatting familiarly as if they were at a festival."

EV



Document Analysis

1. What was the date of this event?
2. Whose head is the executioner holding?
3. Where is the execution taking place?
4. Describe the crowd in attendance.
5. How could you use this document to argue that the Terror was justified or not justified?

Document G

Source: Maximilien Robespierre, *Report on the Principles of Public Morality*, speech to the National Convention, February 5, 1794.

Note: Maximilien de Robespierre was perhaps the most famous French Revolutionary. Educated as a lawyer, he believed in Rousseau's teaching that the right to govern comes from the people. Robespierre also held the belief that all people should be able to vote. He dreamed of making France a constitutional republic rather than a monarchy. He was one of the architects of the Reign of Terror.

EV

Citizen-representatives of the people.

... In order to lay the foundations of democracy among us and to consolidate it, in order to arrive at the peaceful reign of constitutional law, we must finish the war of liberty against tyranny and safely cross through the storms of the revolution: that is the goal of the revolutionary system which you have put in order. You should therefore still base your conduct upon the stormy circumstances in which the republic finds itself....

Social protection is due only peaceful citizens; there are no citizens in the Republic but the republicans. The royalists, the conspirators are, in its eyes, only strangers or, rather, enemies.... Are not the enemies within the allies of those without?...

We must smother the internal and external enemies of the Republic or perish...

Document Analysis

1. According to Robespierre, what are the goals of the war and the revolution?
2. Whom should the government protect, according to Robespierre?
3. What does Robespierre mean by "internal" enemies and "external" enemies of the Republic?
4. What does Robespierre believe should be done to enemies of the Republic?
5. How could you use this document to argue that the Reign of Terror was justified or not justified?