

# Reign of Terror

## A Limited Monarchy

The National Assembly created a limited constitutional monarchy. The new constitution stripped the king of much of his authority and gave the Legislative Assembly the power to create French law. Although the king and his ministers would still hold the executive power to enforce laws, France's assemblymen would be the lawmakers in the country. In September 1791, the National Assembly completed its new constitution, which Louis reluctantly approved, and then handed over its power to a new assembly—the Legislative Assembly. This assembly had the power to create laws and to approve or prevent any war the king declared on other nations.

## Radicals Execute the King

During the frenzied summer of 1792, the leaders of the mobs on the streets had more real power than any government assembly. Although the mobs were made up of the poor, their leaders came from the bourgeoisie. Both men and women of the middle class joined political clubs. The most radical club in 1792 was the **Jacobin Club**, where violent speechmaking was the order of the day. The Jacobins wanted to remove the king and establish a republic. The National Convention (which had replaced the National Assembly), meeting in Paris on September 21, quickly abolished the monarchy and declared France a **republic**. Adult male citizens were granted the right to vote and hold office. Despite the important part they had already played in the Revolution, women were not given the right to vote. The delegates reduced Louis XVI's role from that of a king to that of a common citizen and prisoner. Then, guided by radical Jacobins, they tried Louis for treason and found him guilty. By a very close vote, they sentenced him to death. On January 21, 1793, the ex-king walked with calm dignity up the steps of the scaffold to be beheaded by a machine called the guillotine. Thousands died by the guillotine during the French Revolution.

## France's Citizen Army

The new republic's first problem was the continuing war with Austria and Prussia. Early in 1793, Great Britain, Holland, and Spain joined Prussia and Austria in an alliance known as the First Coalition. Forced to contend with so many enemies, France suffered a string of defeats. The Jacobin leaders took extreme steps to meet the new danger. In February 1793, the National Convention decreed a draft into the army of 300,000 French citizens between the ages of 18 and 40. By 1794, the army had grown to 800,000 and included women.

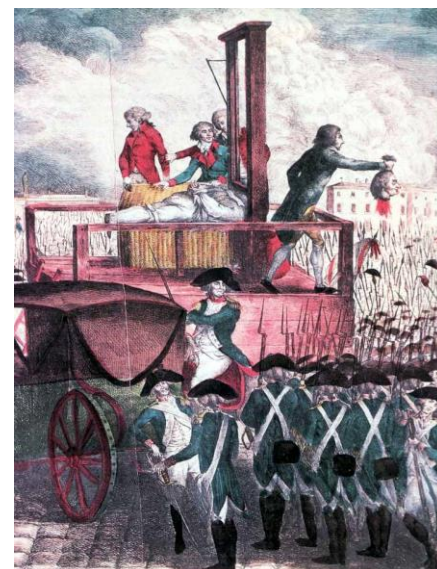
## The Terror Grips France

Foreign armies were not the only enemies of the French republic. 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** (ROHBZ•peer) 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. People began addressing each other as "citizen" and "citizeness" to symbolize the equality of all men and women (as opposed to the old titles of "king" or "lord").

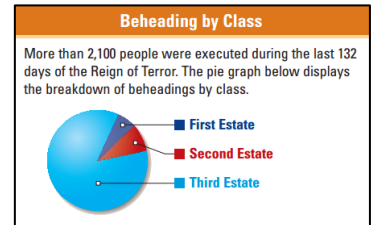
The most famous victim of the Terror was the widowed queen, Marie Antoinette. Calm and dignified, she rode in the death cart past jeering crowds. On the scaffold, she accidentally stepped on her executioner's foot. "Monsieur," she apologized, "I beg your pardon. I did not do it on purpose." Those were 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. 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.

### **End of the Terror**

By July 1794, the members of the National Convention knew that none of them were safe from Robespierre. To save themselves, they turned on him. A group of conspirators demanded his arrest, shouting, “Down with the tyrant!” The next day the Revolution’s last powerful leader went to the guillotine. The Reign of Terror, the radical phase of the French Revolution, ended when Maximilien Robespierre lost his head on July 28, 1794. French public opinion shifted dramatically to the right after Robespierre’s death. People of all classes had grown weary of the Terror. They were also tired of the skyrocketing prices of bread, salt, and other necessities of life after the Terror. In 1795, moderate leaders in the National Convention drafted a new plan of government. The third since 1789, the new constitution placed power firmly in the hands of the upper middle class and called for a two-house legislature and an executive body of five men, known as the Directory.



Beck, Roger B. *World History: Patterns of Interaction*. Evanston, IL: McDougal Littell, 2005. Print.