

The Reign of Terror: Mission Failure

Latayzia Harris—Graduate Student—History

Chair: Dr. MK Thompson
Pittsburg State University

Introduction

The Reign of Terror could not effectively go by any other name. After the rise of the First French Republic the populace was weary, fear was palpable, and Madame Guillotine was thirsty for blood. There were threats from warring French factions and foreign invasion. The people were, in turn, incredibly anxious to see justice for wrongs done to them under the Old Regime. The National Convention's creation of the Committee of Public Safety in 1793 was supposed to quell these fears, but inevitably did the opposite. While the period the Reign of Terror was meant as a social movement to assuage fear and protect France, it only resulted in more mayhem and insecurity throughout the empire.

Purpose

This essay was written in response to a prompt in Dr. MK Thompson's French Revolution course. The prompt essentially asked the writer to decide whether the Reign of Terror and the Committee of Public Safety accomplished their original purpose. After further research it became abundantly clear that they had not. The fear and paranoia that permeated the era gave way to a heinous government that sought to counter any perceived threat.



Evidence

- September Massacres--encouraged citizens to act against the threat of invasion. Between September first and sixth over one thousand people were murdered. The Revolutionary government condoned this.
- March of 1793 Revolutionary Tribunal formed to punish political dissent.
- In April the National Convention created the Committee of Public Safety to essentially spy on citizens; marketed as needed protection from the unseen enemy.
- In August the levee en masse was declared by the National Convention--mass conscription of all able-bodied men in France. Next was the establishment of revolutionary armies.
- The Law of Suspects--allowed any individuals deemed suspicious to be imprisoned.
- The French Republican Calendar--The goal was to remove any religious or royal connections in French society.
- Execution of most Girondins for political dissent.
- The attacks on the clergy, seizure of church grounds, desecration of sacred places, and compulsory attendance of the Cult of Reason in these stolen churches further angered peasants and political dissenters.
- The Law of Frimaire—giving more control to the Committee of Public Safety to further the reign of terror
- Empty promise to abolish slavery—made the formal decree yet did not enforce
- Jacobins suggested Ventose Decrees—proposed seizing property and wealth of political opponents and exiles to redistribute to the peasantry. This never came to fruition.
- Execution of Herbertists and Dantonists that called for reform.
- Cult of the Supreme Being--Robespierre took his favorite bits of Christianity, stuck them with the major tenets of the revolution, and forced on France his new religion.
- Robespierre's Law of Great Terror—gave the Revolutionary Tribunal the power to accelerate convictions and resulted in massive loss of life
- Victory at the Battle of Fleurus—proved that France didn't need the Jacobins; led to the execution of Robespierre and dissolution of the Committee of Public Safety

Conclusion

After Robespierre and the Battle of Fleurus, the Committee of Public Safety was purged of its members who were swiftly replaced. This is often referred to as the Thermidorian reaction. The National Convention instituted term limits and the committee gave up the arsenal of powers that it had accumulated during the Reign of Terror. The white knights of the revolution became the monsters that they fought so hard against. In the end, power meant more to these men than the betterment of France and the initial idea to protect France at all costs lay dying. Under the Reign of Terror, the French were brutalized, and its authors later faced the same fate.

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