

Reign of Terror Lesson Plan

Central Historical Question:

Was the main goal of the Committee of Public Safety to “protect the Revolution from its enemies”?

Materials:

- Copies of Timeline – Key Events of the French Revolution
- Copies of Reign of Terror Textbook Excerpt
- Copies of Documents A and B
- Copies of Reign of Terror Guiding Questions

Plan of Instruction:

[NOTE: This lesson focuses on the Reign of Terror, the radical phase of the French Revolution that began in 1793. Students should be familiar with the general events of the French Revolution before participating in this lesson.]

1. Introduction: Hand out French Revolution Timeline. Read the paragraph on top together as a class. Use the timeline to review key events of the French Revolution leading up to the Reign of Terror. As you review these key events, you may want to emphasize the following:

[Note: The timeline attempts to illustrate the increasing radicalization of the revolution between 1789 and 1792 by depicting the various governments that preceded the Committee of Public Safety. The main takeaway for students is that many people vied for power during the revolution; it was not a single, monolithic effort. The timeline does NOT attempt to tell the story of the Revolution, and in fact, does not include key events, such as the September Massacres, the king’s attempt to flee, etc.].

- The French Revolution began in 1789 (students should be familiar with the grievances of the Third Estate, storming of the Bastille, *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen*).
- Students should understand that the first phase of the French Revolution abolished the system of feudalism.
- When the Legislative Assembly was established in 1791, the king was still the symbolic leader, and property ownership was required for voting. In other words, poor people could not vote.
- When the Jacobins (the more radical political organization) took over and established the National Convention, the monarchy was completely abolished (Louis XVI was eventually executed), and everyone could vote.
- The Committee of Public Safety, headed by Robespierre, took over the National Convention. The Committee of Public Safety claimed

that their goal was to make sure that the enemies of the French Revolution (rich people both abroad and within France) did not roll back the gains that had been achieved during the Revolution.

- Today, students will explore the motives of the Committee of Public Safety and examine the question:

Was the main goal of the Committee of Public Safety to “protect the Revolution from its enemies”?

2. Hand out Reign of Terror Textbook Excerpt and have students read and complete guiding questions.
3. Review student answers to questions.
 - Question 2 might be tricky: the Jacobins would have wanted to wipe out the past because they saw the Revolution as the dawn of a new age based on reason, and they rejected religion and superstition.
 - Question 3 is essential for students to understand. Be sure to review the slogan: Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.
 - Students will probably say that the Committee of Public Safety did not protect the ideals of the Revolution because the textbook gives examples that seem random (eliminating the calendar) and evil (killing tens of thousands).
4. Hand out Document A (Decree Against Profiteers) and have students complete guiding questions. Review student answers:
 - Students should recognize that the Decree was passed to prevent price gouging (if students are unfamiliar with this economic concept, you should explain).
 - Students should also recognize that such behavior would be seen as especially egregious in light of the ideals of the Revolution.
 - It is possible, therefore, that some students will say that the Decree Against Profiteers supports the argument that the Committee of Public Safety was, indeed, protecting the Revolution from its enemies.
5. Hand out Document B (Law of Suspects) and have students complete guiding questions. Review student answers:
 - For Question 2, it’s important that students try to imagine why such people would have been considered threatening to the Committee of Public Safety. You might engage students in discussion of the following question: *Just because someone was an enemy of the*

Committee of Public Safety, does it mean that person was against the French Revolution in general?

- Students should recognize that the Committee of Public Safety believed it was protecting the ideals of the Revolution.
- Students will likely say that the Law of Suspects does not support the claim that the Committee of Public Safety protected the ideals of the Revolution from enemies. They will likely see the list of potential suspects as overreaching and not necessarily comprised of people who would pose a threat to the ideals of the Revolution.

6. Individual work: Students write a paragraph in response to the final prompt.
7. If time allows, ask students to share their responses.

Citations:

Decree Against Profiteers: Stewart, J.H. (1951). *A Documentary survey of the French Revolution*, 469–71. New York: Macmillan. Retrieved October 5, 2012, from: <http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/414/>

Law of Suspects: Duvergier, J-B. (1793). *Collection complète des lois, décrets, ordonnances, règlements, avis du conseil d'état . . . de 1788 a 1830 . . .*, 2d ed., 110 vols. Paris. 6:172–73. Retrieved October 5, 2012, from: <http://sourcebook.fitchburgstate.edu/history/lawofsuspects.html>

Modern World History: Patterns of Interaction. Evanston, IL: McDougal Littell (2006), pp. 226-227.