Robespierre’s Catechism of Terror

In notes written in the style of a Catholic catechism, Robespierre advocated terror against the enemies of the Revolution.

What is our aim?
It is the use of the constitution for the benefit of the people.

Who is likely to oppose us?
The rich and the corrupt.

What methods will they employ?
Slander and hypocrisy.

What factors will encourage the use of such means?
The ignorance of the sans-culottes (the working class).

The people must therefore be enlightened. What are the obstacles to their enlightenment?
Mercenary journalists who daily mislead them by shameless distortions.

What conclusion follows?
That it is necessary to proscribe these writers as the most dangerous enemies of the country and to circulate an abundance of good writing.

How can we end the civil war?
By punishing traitors and conspirators, particularly if they are deputies or administrators; by sending loyal troops under patriotic leaders to cut down the aristocrats of Lyon, Marseille, Toulon, the Vendée, the Jura, and all other districts where the banner of royalism and rebellion has been raised; and by making a terrible example of all the criminals who have outraged liberty and spilled the blood of patriots.

“The most radical revolutionary will become a conservative the day after the revolution.”
— Hannah Arendt, Political Theorist, The New Yorker Magazine, 1970
Jean-Paul Marat was an extremely radical journalist and a member of the National Convention known for inciting violence. His newspaper, L’Ami du peuple (The Friend of the People), advocated for the rights of the Sans-Culottes against those Marat believed to be enemies of the people, which to him were numerous and generally deserving of execution. During the summer of 1793, Charlotte Corday, a supporter of the more moderate Girondists, whose members had recently been executed with his encouragement, fatally stabbed him as he bathed. Jacques-Louis David painted the Death of Marat in 1793. The painting provides a narrative of Marat’s murder, showing Corday’s letter and knife and Marat’s wound and blood.
Artistic depictions of the Pietà
Virgin Mary cradling the body of Jesus Christ

Anonymous, Poland, c. 1450; Michelangelo, Italy, 1499; Giovanni Bellini, Italy, 1505
La Marseilles

Revolution and war gave the French people a strong sense of national identity. By 1793, France was a nation in arms. From the port city of Marseille, troops marched to a rousing new song that would later become the French national anthem.

Arise, children of the Fatherland,
The day of glory has arrived!
Against us tyranny Raises its bloody banner
Do you hear, in the countryside, The roar of those ferocious soldiers?
They're coming right into your arms
To cut the throats of your sons and women!

To arms, citizens,
Form your battalions,
Let's march, let's march!
Let the impure blood Water our furrows!

What does this horde of slaves, Of traitors and conjured kings want?

For whom are these vile chains,
These long-prepared irons?
Frenchmen, for us, ah! What outrage!
What fury must it arouse!
It is us they dare plan
To return to the old slavery!

To arms, citizens,
Form your battalions,
Let's march, let's march!
Let the impure blood Water our furrows!

What! Foreign cohorts Would make the law in our homes!
What! These mercenary phalanxes Would strike down our proud warriors!
Great God! By chained hands

Our brows would yield under the yoke
Vile despots would have themselves
The masters of our destinies!

To arms, citizens,
Form your battalions,
Let's march, let's march!
Let the impure blood Water our furrows!

Tremble, tyrants and you traitors
The shame of all parties,
Tremble! Your parricidal schemes
Will finally receive their reward!
Everyone is a soldier to fight you
If they fall, our young heroes,
The earth will produce new ones,
Ready to fight against you!...
Dechristianization of France

During the Revolution, the Catholic Church and clergy were increasingly targeted in what is described as the Dechristianization of the country. Church lands were confiscated, members of clergy were forced to swear allegiance to the Revolutionary government or face death, crosses and religious statues were destroyed, and many churches were closed or converted for civic purposes. Two measures were particularly extreme. The Gregorian calendar was replaced by the new French Republican Calendar, which featured 12 new months, each with 3 weeks of 10 days each, eliminating Sundays. To replace Christianity, two “civic religions” were developed. The first was the Cult of Reason, an atheistic religion inspired by Enlightenment philosophy and devoted to “Reason.” Robespierre rejected the Cult of Reason and replaced it with his own creation, the Cult of the Supreme Being, which was deistic, meaning it believed in God but approached God through reason. Both cults employed imagery from pre-Christian classical civilization. For example, as many churches were converted for their use, the Virgin Mary was often replaced by the Roman goddess Liberty.

Festival of Reason
Festival of the Supreme Being

To inaugurate the new state religion, Robespierre declared that 20 Prairial Year II (8 June 1794) would be the first day of national celebration of the Supreme Being. Every locality was mandated to hold a commemorative event, but the event in Paris was designed on a massive scale. The festival was organized by the artist Jacques-Louis David and took place around a man-made mountain on the Champ de Mars. Robespierre assumed full leadership of the event, forcefully—and, to many, ostentatiously—declaring the truth and "social utility" of his new religion. The Cult of the Supreme Being and its festival can be said to have contributed to the Thermidorian reaction and the downfall of Robespierre. With his death at the guillotine on 28 July 1794, the cult lost all official sanction and disappeared from public view. It was officially banned by Napoleon Bonaparte on 8 April 1802.
The Guillotine

If you think the guillotine was a cruel form of capital punishment, think again. Dr. Joseph Ignace Guillotin proposed a machine that satisfied many needs—it was efficient, humane, and democratic.

A physician and member of the National Assembly, Guillotin claimed that those executed with the device “wouldn’t even feel the slightest pain.”

Prior to the guillotine’s introduction in 1792, many French criminals had suffered through horrible punishments in public places. Although public punishments continued to attract large crowds, not all spectators were pleased with the new machine. Some witnesses felt that death by the guillotine occurred much too quickly to be enjoyed by an audience.

The Beheading by Class

More than 2,100 people were executed during the last 132 days of the Reign of Terror. The pie graph below displays the breakdown of beheadings by class.

1. Synthesizing In what ways was the guillotine an efficient means of execution?

2. Comparing France continued to use the guillotine until 1977. Four years later, France abolished capital punishment. Conduct research to identify countries where capital punishment is still used. Use your findings to create a map titled “Countries Using Capital Punishment.”