

# Reign of Terror

The Reign of Terror (1793-1794) was a period in the French Revolution marked by a series of massacres and public execution that took place in an atmosphere marked by revolutionary fervour, anti-nobility sentiments and wild accusations of the Jacobin faction led by Maximilien Robespierre and the Committee of Public Safety

This article will give details about the Reign of Terror which will be useful in the world history segment of the UPSC Mains exam.

## What were the factors that led to the Reign of Terror?

Those who know about the Reign of Terror think of it as a single-factor event in which Robespierre and the Committee of Public Safety that he chaired were responsible for all the bloodshed that happened along the way. Although Robespierre is the main cause, the Reign of Terror was, in fact, a culmination of several factors in play.

They are as follows:

**Enlightenment:** Broadly speaking, enlightenment stressed on the importance of rational thinking and challenged the legal and moral foundation of society at the time. The leaders of the Reign of Terror, however, had other interpretations about Enlightenment.

One aspect of Enlightenment was the Social Contract, which argued that each person was born with rights and they would come together to form a government that would protect these fundamental rights. In other words, the government was supposed to act in the interests of the general public. Drawing on this idea, Robespierre felt that such interests would be better protected once those who were fighting it were eliminated in their entirety. Those who were against the government at the time were termed as 'tyrants' fighting against the virtue and honour of the French Revolution.

Additionally, Robespierre believed that the virtue needed for any democratic government was extremely lacking in the French people. As a result, he decided to weed out those he believed could never possess this virtue. The result was a continual push towards the Reign of Terror

**Threats of Foreign Invasions:** When the French Revolution began, other Monarchies in France's immediate neighbourhood looked upon it with open disdain, if not outright hostility. Afraid that the ideas of the revolution would cause chaos in their own kingdoms if it was not contained, leaders such as Frederick William II of Prussia and Leopold II of Austria (Brother to Marie Antoinette, the Queen of France) made a pact with Louis XVI.

This was known as the Pilnitz Declaration. The declaration stated that Prussia and Austria would restore the French Monarchy to its absolute upon the joining of other European powers. The revolutionaries who were in power during this the time, saw this as blatant interference in the internal matters of France, prompting them to declare war on 20 April 1792. The war began badly for France with a series of defeats that saw the Austro-Prussian forces slowly advance to the capital of Paris.

The combined forces threatened that should the Louis XVI be harmed in any way, 'Paris would burn'. The series of defeats at the hands of Austria and Prussia and uprisings within its borders pushed the French government to carry out drastic measures to ensure the loyalty of its population

**Popular Pressure:** There was pressure on the National Convention to initiate reforms that would uplift the poor. Moreover, the infighting between the conservatives (Girondins) and the radicals (Montagnards) only added to the instability of the revolutionary government  
Popular pressure

Moreover, the sans-culottes, the urban workers of France, agitated leaders to inflict punishments on those who opposed the interests of the poor. The sans-culottes' violently demonstrated, pushing their demands and creating constant pressure for the Montagnards to enact reform.

The resulting instability caused problems that made forming the new Republic and achieving full political support critical.

### **Religious upheaval:**

The Reign of Terror was characterized by a rejection of religious authority. Religious elements that long before were a mainstay of French society were replaced by reason and scientific thinking. The radical elements of the revolution desire a cultural revolution that would purge religious influence from society as a whole. Many long-held powers and rights were taken from the clergy and given to the state. In 1789, priests were killed or forced to leave France, while lands belonging to the church were seized.

Despite the best efforts taken by the government, the vast majority of the French population held on to its beliefs and clashed with the government in the process. The resulting clash of ideals only laid the foundation of justifying the use of terror to achieve revolutionary ideals and ridding France of its religiosity.

### **Role of Maximilien Robespierre during the Reign of Terror**

Following the execution of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette in 1793, Maximilien Robespierre began his own rise to power within the revolution. As the head of the Committee for Public Safety, he would be remembered for the role he played during the Reign of Terror. Throughout

1794, he would accuse many members of the National Convention of treasonous and un-revolutionary activities, based on hearsay and insufficient evidence. One by one, these members would meet their end at the guillotine until on June 4th, 1794, Robespierre was elected the president of the National Convention.

In a bid to eradicate Christianity from France, Robespierre declared a new religion called the Supreme Being. He oversaw its celebration in Paris whose excesses upset many members of the National Convention. Coupled with this was the excessive amount of executions which were carried out daily under a new set of laws that would straight away lead to a death sentence on accusations alone.

The final straw came when Robespierre claimed to have a list of people that were the enemies of the revolution. Because of the threat of this list, the members of the National Convention voted to arrest him. On July 28th, 1794, Soldiers stormed into his residence. Upon their arrival, Robespierre attempted to commit suicide but only shattered his jaw in the process. He was executed the same day without a trial, fittingly in the same manner as many of his victims.

## The aftermath of the Reign of Terror

With his death, the fear and paranoia of the revolutionaries ended and the Reign of Terror was over. After the execution of Robespierre and the excess of the Reign of Terror, the National Convention was replaced by the Directory in 1795. The powers of the Committee for Public Safety were gradually eroded in the ensuing years.

The Reign of Terror was one of the most significant events of the French Revolution. It was originally carried out to stop supposed threats to revolution but ended up displaying the excesses of the revolution and the heights of violence. In total, over 40,000 citizens of France were executed during the Reign of Terror with many beheaded by the guillotine.