

French Revolution DBQ

Question: Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the Terror as an instrument of the French Revolution.

Terror is a quick, easy, and effective tool of coercion and the subsequent short term imposition of order. However, it proves itself to be just as equally ineffective at winning popular opinion and support over the medium and long term, especially when this method of enforcement is administered in large doses; Maximilien Robespierre was one of many examples of national leaders who met their ultimate demise as a result of the ensuing backlash following their harsh policies. The Terror, often associated with Robespierre in a personal light, proved itself to be worthy of note in this aspect.

With the fall of any national governing body, will come chaos; it is then the ultimate responsibility of the succeeding governing body to quell this ensuing unrest and disorder in order to prove itself more capable of managing the nation than its predecessor. The governing authority that replaced the Bourbon monarchy in France understood this all too well. The inability of the revolutionary government of France to subdue its rebellious provinces would almost certainly invite foreign intervention and meddling, most pressingly by hostile armies on the borders of France herself. On the domestic front, failure to accomplish the aforementioned would enable potential governing bodies to emerge and challenge the national Revolutionary government for its legitimacy over its right and governance of France.

The popular term that can be applied to this is that desperate times require ever more desperate measures. This is the exact mentality expressed by Robespierre, utilizing the phrase, "Its force to repress must be commensurate with the audacity or treachery of those who conspire against it." It was essentially argued that extreme terrorist measures were justified in their execution by virtue of their goal of protecting the fledgeling government, with the goal of establishing a regime that championed liberty afterward. This was reflected in the beginning of the Reign of Terror in 1793, during which time General Ronsin proclaimed the need for a great example to the fledgling Republic to see. This is not an unknown mentality in its application and usage. The use of guerilla tactics and raids on hostile towns and facilities by American forces during the previous American Revolutionary war could be framed as being heavy handed and terroristic in nature. Afterwards, the government tasked itself with survival, accomplished this, then further established itself as an institution at least nominally protecting individual liberty. This is where the French revolutionary government, and its Reign of Terror, ultimately went awry, however, as their attempts to set examples did not kill the seeds of rebellion against the Revolution, but watered what seeds existed by increasing resentment to the new, chaotic government.

With the passage of the Law of Suspects, the government authorized itself with sweeping powers to suppress and arrest dissenters to the new regime, with loosely defined parameters as to who met the qualifications to be formally charged, and so dissenters were charged for conspiracy, counterrevolutionary opinions, and hostile actions against the state. This allowed the government great leeway with respect to its ability to suppress internal destabilizing factions. This yields immediate advantages. The stabilization of the internal matters of a nation such as Revolutionary France can prove invaluable, enabling more

resources and attention to be diverted to foreign matters and elsewhere. The swift silencing enables quicker action to be taken, and promotes efficiency. However, the sheer number of executions sent waves of terror through the French people, with a particularly high number of Parisians executed, numbering in excess of 2,000. While the setting of an example can prove invaluable against those who would rise against you, it simultaneously creates enemies out of the friends of those who were destroyed. In doing this to a great extent, and being somewhat generous as to who meets the executioner, easily makes the tactics used during the Terror a painful double-edged sword. Robespierre himself lost allies, such as Desmoulins, who called Robespierre's tactics of terror a folly. Despite this, some remained loyal to the revolution either out of fear or belief, as seen in Document 5 in which some peasants believed that those who were executed were justly eliminated. This could perhaps be explained by William Pitt's analysis of the situation, in which he describes the terror of the guillotine compelling the French revolutionaries to move forward in hopes of seeing the end of the revolution and the fruits of their labors, despite the unfortunate bloodshed. Essentially, some revolutionaries accepted the government of Robespierre out of what they believed was necessity in order to distance the country from the past and continue in attempting to complete the revolution. This remained largely an exception to the general reaction towards Robespierre's policies, however. Ultimately, the usage of Terror as an instrument of the French Revolution backfired greatly on Robespierre and his government.

In short, the very same tactics that made the Terror so effective in respect to crushing public dissidence are exactly what made it ultimately so destructive to those who initiated the policy. The employment of such policy definitely yielded dividends in the short run. Taking into account the immediate situation that faced the nascent French political authority, such a move made sense in terms of national consolidation and stabilization, the two areas in which the advantages of these reforms can be immediately utilized. The realization of the disadvantages of this policy can be easy to put off in the short term, but were no less apparent in the end. The backfiring of the policy by virtue of the terror of the people, and the rejection of the philosophy of the instrument of terror by Robespierre, ultimately hobbled the ultimately hypocritical government. In pursuit of this, the Republic ended up exercising the very same oppression it sought to reject, making that advantages it handed the new government a somewhat moot point.