

Radicalization of the French Revolution

Central Historical Question:

When fighting a revolution for liberty can the use of terror be justified?
(Do the ends justify the means? “The government in a revolution is the despotism of liberty against tyranny” - Robespierre)

Document #1 - The Tennis Court Oath *June 20 1789*

Since the hall of the Estates General is occupied by armed men; the Third Estate has been forced to meet in the Tennis Court Room of Versailles. Wounded in their rights and worried by the intensity with which the king is pushing disastrous measures, the representatives of the nation bind themselves to the public good and the interests of the fatherland with a solemn oath.

To establish a constitution, to renew public order, and to maintain the true principles of monarchy, all members of this National Assembly immediately take an oath never to separate, and to reassemble wherever circumstances require, until the constitution is established and fixed upon solid foundations.

Document #2 – A witness to the Storming of the Bastille *July 14 1789*

The fighting grew steadily more intense. People bravely faced death and danger. And so the Bastille fell. Serene and blessed liberty has, at last, been introduced into this abode of horrors, this refuge of despotism and its crimes.

Cries of pleasure issue from every heart; the conquerors, glorious and covered in honor, carry the flags of victory, creating a frightening and splendid spectacle. This glorious day must amaze our enemies, and usher in for us the triumph of justice and liberty. In the evening, there were celebrations.

Document #3- The National Assembly's Declaration of the Rights of Man- August 1789

1. Men are born and remain free and equal in rights; social distinctions can be established on for the common benefit.
2. The aim of every political association is the conservation of the imprescriptible rights of man; these rights are liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression.
4. Liberty consists in being able to do anything that does not harm another person.
10. No one may be disturbed because of his opinions, even religious, provided that their public demonstration does not disturb the public order established by law.
11. The free communication of thoughts and opinions is one of the most precious rights of man: every citizen can therefore freely speak, write, print.

Document #4- Maximilien Francois Robespierre December 1792

It is with regret that I pronounce the fatal truth: Louis ought to perish rather than a hundred thousand virtuous citizens; Louis must die that the country may live.

Document #5- On the Principles of Political Morality, Robespierre 1794

If virtue be the spring of a popular government in times of peace, the spring of that government during a revolution is virtue combined with terror: virtue, without which terror is destructive; terror, without which virtue is impotent. Terror is only justice prompt, severe and inflexible. The government in a revolution is the despotism of liberty against tyranny.

Document #6- Letters of Helen Williams, a foreigner, living in Paris. 1793

We feared to go out, in case, without realizing it, we committed some offense that would lead to being arrested. We hardly spoke to anyone, for there were spies everywhere, and we jumped at each knock at the door, fearing arrest. Prisons grow more crowded, and more were going to the scaffold as the Reign of Terror tightened its hold.

“Suspicion” was enough for imprisonment. Conspiracy and murder were in the air. A man was arrested because he “looked” noble, another because a stranger said he supported the King. Some were arrested for having been rich. Many who were arrested asked for no reason.

And the numbers of executions rose.

The guillotine was claiming both the innocent and the guilty alike, and at such a rate that the gutters seemed to stream with blood. And just when it seemed that things could get no worse, when you thought it was not possible to increase the stream of people flowing to the scaffold, you were proved wrong, and the pace of the flow quickened even more.