

# The Reign of Terror

History

Year 8 - Lesson 9

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After 1789, the French Revolution experienced some serious difficulties. The National Assembly and the Declaration of Rights of Man were popular at first. However, some people who had benefited from the Ancien Regime started to become critical. In particular, some aristocrats and leading clergy were upset because they lost land and many of their tax **privileges**. Other leading aristocrats disliked that they could no longer influence government decisions. There were also lots of people that liked the idea of a constitutional monarchy, but were scared about events like the Storming of the Bastille and the Women's March on Versailles. They did not like that the sans culottes were becoming more **radical**.



# The Flight to Varennes

As a result, some aristocrats left the country and others tried to advise Louis XVI to do the same. They hoped that outside France they could get support from Marie Antoinette's brother, the Emperor of Austria. Then, with a foreign army, the French aristocrats could return to France and put Louis XVI back in charge as an absolute monarch. In 1791, Louis and Marie-Antoinette tried to make their escape. But before they got to the border, they were spotted in a town called Varennes. Louis and Marie-Antoinette were forced to return to Paris and became prisoners.



The Revolution then became more radical. A new republican constitution was designed and laws were planned to make sure everyone could afford basics like bread. But these more radical changes led to more and more people criticising the Revolution. Some, like Olympe de Gouges admired the Revolution but wanted it to go further. She said that the original Declaration of Rights of Man had not taken Enlightenment thinking far enough. She published an alternative Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen arguing that women should have the same political rights as men. Most importantly they should be able to vote. Others criticised the revolution because they thought it had gone too far. Many French Catholics felt uncomfortable about how hostile **revolutionaries** were to the Church.



Leading revolutionaries and the sans culottes started to see some people as 'enemies of the Revolution'. The Catholic Church and aristocrats were seen as particularly suspicious. At this point the Revolution entered a murderous stage known as The Reign of Terror. Thousands of aristocrats and Catholics were executed including Louis and Marie Antoinette. The man most associated with this was a lawyer called Robespierre. Robespierre was obsessed with the Enlightenment thinker Rousseau and previously had campaigned against the death penalty. But as the revolution looked like it was under threat, Robespierre and his fellow revolutionaries did not know what to do other than to execute those who were critical of the revolution.

During the Reign of Terror, no one was safe. Even people who had supported the revolution from the beginning or former friends of Robespierre could be executed. This included Olympe de Gouges who was sent to the guillotine in 1793. Eventually Robespierre himself was executed which brought the Reign of Terror to an end.



# Glossary

**Guillotine:** a machine used to behead people.

**Privileges:** a benefit that some, but not all, people get, i.e. not paying tax.

**Radical (noun):** someone with extreme beliefs.

**Radical (adjective):** something which is extreme

**Revolutionary:** someone who believes in the revolution or works to support a revolution.



# Comprehension Questions

1. What machine was used to execute people during the French Revolution?

Sentence starter: The machine used to execute people during the French Revolution was called...

2. Why did aristocrats become critical of the Revolution?
3. Why did Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette attempt to leave France?
4. How did Olympe de Gouges argue that the revolution needed to change more?
5. Challenge question: What was the Reign of Terror?



# Extension Question

6. In what ways did the Revolution become more radical after 1789?

Use the sentence starters and key words below to answer this question

Sentence starters options:	Examples
<p><i>One way that the Revolution changed after 1789 was....</i></p> <p><i>Another way that the French Revolution changed was....</i></p> <p><i>However, the Revolution did not</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Constitution</li><li>- Republic</li><li>- Terror</li><li>- Sans culottes</li><li>- Guillotine</li></ul>

