

Lesson Thirty-Seven

Aftermath Of The French Revolution

LESSON IDEA

To show how terror was used to make the French Revolution "successful."

PREPARATION

Read the discussion segments of the lesson and prepare appropriate examples, facts, clippings, and booklets about communism for further study by family members. Also, read the "During The Week" section and adapt the suggestion to fit your family's interests.

EVERY REVOLUTION has its unique symbols that people recall when looking back on the event in historical perspective. What are some of the symbols of the American Revolution? [Examples from school classroom study or our Family Heritage Series lessons could include the Liberty Bell, the Declaration of Independence, and "Old Glory.]

What are some of the symbols of the French Revolution? [The guillotine is probably, known, while more advanced students of history might mention the red hat worn by the revolutionaries or the tricolor cockade (a rosette or similar ornament worn on a hat as a badge).]

The guillotine is the most memorable — and infamous — symbol of the French Revolution. Some historians have claimed that this brutal instrument of death was used only sparingly, to rid France of hated aristocrats and a corrupt King and Queen. In fact, however, more than one million persons were killed during the revolution, most of whom were commoners, not aristocrats. For example, during one six-week period in which 2,700 died, at least 2,000 were from the working class — the so-called "poor people" of France. Why do you think that these farmers, workers, merchants, and craftsmen whom the revolutionaries claimed would benefit most from the revolution were instead murdered by it? [Allow time for discussion and speculation.]

The group of conspirators mentioned in last week's lesson had succeeded in dethroning

and beheading the King. The monarchy was no more; the revolutionaries had seized control of the government. Chief among them was Maximilien Robespierre, a member of the secret group called the Illuminati. Robespierre and his compatriots had some peculiar ideas about government. Their two main goals, they claimed, were equality and state control. Every aspect of life and every human relationship (except their own, of course) were to be regulated by the State. Everyone was to be equal in money, property, employment, and food, and other essential elements of existence. Does that theory sound familiar? What contemporary movements can you name that also preach equality and government control? [They would include communism, socialism, and sundry other "isms" based on collectivism and compulsion.]

Here are some examples of how government control was to work:

.... Parents were to be forbidden either to strike or to caress their children, and the children were to be dressed all alike in cotton, to live on "roots, vegetables, fruit, with bread and water," and to sleep on mats upon the floor.

Boys were to belong to their parents only till the age of five; after that they were to become the property of the State until their death. Every one was to be forced by law to form friendships, and "to declare publicly once a year in the Temple who were his friends." Any infraction of these laws was to be punished by banishment. (*The French Revolution* (1919) by Nesta Webster.)

If such ideas seemed difficult to implement, the revolutionaries had an even greater problem with their attempt to make everyone equal. The population of France at the time was about 25 million people, and there was simply not enough money, property, jobs, and food to go around. With "too many" people and too few resources, the revolutionaries either had to increase resources, reduce the number of people, or abandon their scheme of equality. Which option do you think they chose? Why? [Discuss the amoral nature of the criminal revolutionary mind, and the "any means to an

end” ethic of history’s most brutal dictators.]

As reprehensible as it may seem, the conspirators decided to get rid of the supposed surplus of people. From papers seized at Robespierre’s home after the Revolution, we know they set out to kill between 12 and 15 million people. An author of the period described how the revolutionaries met nightly in the palace of the former King to plot this deadly plan while relaxing on soft armchairs and luxurious sofas amidst the splendor of royal trappings. Then, around a great oval table, they spread out a map of France and determined the number of victims to be liquidated in each district. It this palatial room that plans for new methods of murder were conceived and from which orders were sent to appointed executioners in each province. It was here that the revolutionaries tallied human heads like scores in game. Does this sound like the equality and liberty that they had promised the people?

DEATH AND DESTRUCTION were not new to these evil despots. Already they had eliminated most of the aristocracy and clergy, imprisoned and terrorized the educated and the businessmen, and in general declared war on civilized society. Factories had been burned, libraries destroyed, and great pieces of art either demolished or sold to finance the revolution.

They now turned their attention to the “common people.” Hundreds were designated for execution, regardless of their beliefs, past usefulness, age, or sex. In Robespierre’s opinion, France had too many people. There were too many hands for the available jobs; too many men “jostling each other too much for each to be able to live at ease.”

FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

In this lesson we have focused on acts of terror, but not on the personalities of the revolutionaries. Who were the men who engaged in mass murder with such calculating calm? And what of the inevitable power struggle within their own ranks? How was it conducted? Who emerged as victor? Such questions are answered and documented by Nesta Webster in *The French Revolution*. So we repeat last week’s suggestion that family members read that important book. Though out-of-print, copies may be available in public library or from used bookstores.

The revolutionary answer to the problem was to brutally eliminate the “surplus” population.

Each day, carts full of men, women, and children were hauled to the guillotine. In Paris, the executioner Sanson was singled out for praise for speeding up production by guillotining 12 victims every 13 minutes. Indeed, the revolutionaries were so pleased with his speed that they ordered “the executioner of Marseilles to Paris ... to take a course of guillotining with his colleague Sanson.” Otherwise, they coldly lamented, “we shall never get through.”

SOON, HOWEVER, even the most efficient guillotining proved too slow, so “fusillades” were adopted as a supplementary method. Young citizens were tied together in couples and blown into fragments by rifle and cannon fire. In one province, 500 children were driven into a field where they were clubbed, sabred, and shot down. Many died while clinging to the knees of their assassins, weeping and begging for mercy.

But the mounting death toll did not satisfy the revolutionary leaders. Hundreds, or even thousands, of corpses were not enough when the goal was 12 to 15 million. Additional methods of extermination were sought, and it was then that Carrier, one of the chief executioners, initiated a scheme which for all time has rendered his name infamous: the “noyades” (pronounced nwah-yahd) or wholesale drowning in the Loire (Lwahr), one of France’s main rivers.

His first experiment involved aged priests, about 90 in number, who were placed aboard a barge and piloted to mid-stream. Carrier’s agents then opened the ports of the barge, flooding it and sending the victims to the bottom of the river. Encouraged by this success, Carrier set about his work on a larger scale. Throughout the bitter December nights of 1793

... crowds of poor women ... some clasping babies to their breasts, some leading little children by the hand, were driven out into the cold and darkness, they knew not whither; only when they found themselves on the bank of the river where the great barges waited the hideous truth dawned on them. Then all at once they burst into tears and lamentations, crying out, “They are going to drown us,

and they will not bring us to trial!" Many holding their babies closer refused to give them up to strangers, and bore them ... in their arms down beneath the dark water of the Loire. These perhaps were wisest, for many of those poor children, whom stronger-minded mothers had placed in sympathetic arms held out to them, were seized by Carrier's agents and herded into the . . . prison of the city, to die of cold and pestilence [disease] .

— From Webster's *The French Revolution*

These noyades, or mass drownings, were playfully described by Carrier (who especially despised children, whom he called "whelps" who "must be destroyed") as "bathing-parties."

THE PRECISE NUMBER of persons murdered by guillotine, firing squad, cannon, or drowning is impossible to calculate. The slaughter was too extensive for adequate record keeping. One analyst places the death toll at no less than 1,025,711. We do know with certainty, however, that the massacres were wholesale and indiscriminate, and that the overwhelming majority of the victims were "common people." We also know that the massacres were conducted systematically, coldly, and purposefully to reduce the country's population.

Can you think of any other nations where millions of its own people have been murdered by its own leaders to bring about "equality"? (Remind family members of the mass extermination of people in the former Soviet Union, Red China, and Cambodia. U.S. government reports estimate that between 35 and 45 million Russians were murdered to solidify Soviet rule, while from 40 to 64 million Chinese were liquidated. According to the Guinness Book of Records, as a percentage of a nation's total population "the worst genocide appears to have been that in [communist] Cambodia (or Kampuchea)," where "more than a third of the 7 million Khmers were killed" between April 1975 and January 1979. Reminiscent of population-control policies during the French Revolution, "The regime of Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot had set out to exterminate 6.5 million of the country's 7.5 million population to make its brutal rule more secure.")

Any band of revolutionaries that accepts lying, duplicity, treachery, and murder as justifiable when pursuing its goals has adopted the "any means to an end" strategy. Since that strategy is contrary to all traditional moral teachings, an attack on religious faith and a nation's churches becomes inevitable. France was no exception.

The Bishop of Paris was the first to feel he fury of revolutionary hatred. Terrorized by threats against his life, he eventually presented himself to the revolutionary rulers and declared that "the will of the Sovereign People" had now become "his supreme law"; and since the Sovereign so willed it, there should be no other worship than that of "liberty and holy equality." He then surrendered his cross, ring, and other religious insignia and placed the red cap of revolution on his head. His submission served as a signal for the desecration of churches to begin.

Throughout Paris and the provinces, sacred buildings were stripped of their contents. Donkeys laden with sacred relics and religious ornaments passed through the streets; crucifixes were cast into bonfires amidst cries of "Perish forever the memory of the priests! Perish forever Christian superstition! Long live the sublime religion of Nature!"

Revolutionaries and executioners mocked Christianity from its own pulpits. The shrine of Saint Genevieve, the patron saint of Paris, was burned. A Feast of Reason was held in the Cathedral of Notre Dame. Drunken and blasphemous orgies were held in other religious edifices.

But France did not lack an object of worship. Robespierre, at the height of his power, presented himself to the people as a god. Presiding at the "Feast of the Supreme Being," he abandoned the pretense that he was a simple shirt-sleeved leader by appeared before the throngs curled and powdered, in a pale-blue coat and yellow napkin breeches, holding in his hands an enormous bouquet of flowers and sheaths of wheat. The storm of applause which greeted his arrival affected him like wine, and at that precise moment, according to a witness on the scene, "he believed himself to be King and God."

Have contemporary communist nations created their own human gods as did the French conspirators? What examples from recent history can you cite [Encourage discussion. Point out how the Red

Chinese were made to worship Chairman Mao, huge pictures of whom were placed in streets and public buildings. Mao's speeches and sayings were published in book and pamphlet form and widely distributed throughout Red China and elsewhere as revolutionary "bibles." The same pattern was followed in Cuba, the former Soviet Union, and many other communist countries.]

How, then, did the French Revolution end? Ultimately the conspirators, in their individual lust for power, conspired against and destroyed each other one by one. Robespierre succeeded, for example, in guillotining the Duc d'Orleans and many other rivals. But his triumph was short-lived and soon he, too, felt the sharp blade of the guillotine descend on his neck.

The government of France passed from one group of power-seekers to another until at last, in 1804, Napoleon Bonaparte became Emperor. By reestablishing despotism, Napoleon succeeded in restoring order. Then in 1814, the French people — sickened by anarchy, revolution, imperialism, and coercive attempt to achieve equality — reverted to monarchy by elevating Louis XVIII to the throne. Six months later, however, Napoleon was once again in power.

King to dictator, dictator to revolution, revolution to anarchy, anarchy to despotism, despotism to dictatorship, dictatorship to revolution — all within the course of 80 years of unrest and upheaval for a nation whose citizens wanted liberty but did not understand its basic principles. What key principle of freedom did the French overlook? [Discuss the American Declaration of Independence, which asserts that rights and freedoms come from God, not from government, and that governments are instituted to preserve and protect rights, not to initiate or tamper with them.]

Perhaps their most serious error was the refusal of the French to make government a servant of the people, as the American revolutionaries had. They persisted, instead, in the misguided belief that government should be a master. The continually sought a benevolent master that would provide them liberty and freedom. They turned from king, to revolutionary, to emperor — only to receive a new brand of tyranny from each.

Concluding Thought

Terror and death are the hallmarks of history's file on the French Revolution. From such roots grew the communist revolutions of later decades, replete with their firing squads, mass graves, barbed wire fences, and iron curtains. Indeed, virtually every revolution save one — the American Revolution — has ended in dictatorship and destruction. The unique American venture has left in its wake mostly symbols of rejoicing, not death and destruction. The Liberty Bell is one example. We will learn more about it next week.

DURING THE WEEK

If you do not already have a copy of "What Is Communism?" by Robert Welch, make it a project to obtain and read this informative pamphlet. The text of a November 10, 1969 address by Mr. Welch, it provides an excellent summary of communist terror as well as specific examples from a number of countries. Use it as the basis for a family discussion of parallels between revolutionary communist movements of the 20th century and the 18th century French Revolution. ("What Is Communism?" was reprinted in *The Bulletin* of The John Birch Society for May 1970. A brief excerpt, pertaining to the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, appeared in *The New American* for July 31, 1989.)