

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,

