

WAS THE FRENCH REVOLUTION A SUCCESS OR A FAILURE?

DOCUMENT A

[The French have rebelled] against a mild and lawful monarch, with more fury, outrage, and insult, than ever any people has been known to rise against the most illegal usurper, or the most bloodthirsty tyrant...

They have found their punishment in their success. Laws overturned; tribunals subverted...the people impoverished; a church pillaged, and...civil and military anarchy made the constitution of the kingdom...

Were all these dreadful things necessary?

Source: Edmund Burke, British politician, published in 1790

DOCUMENT C

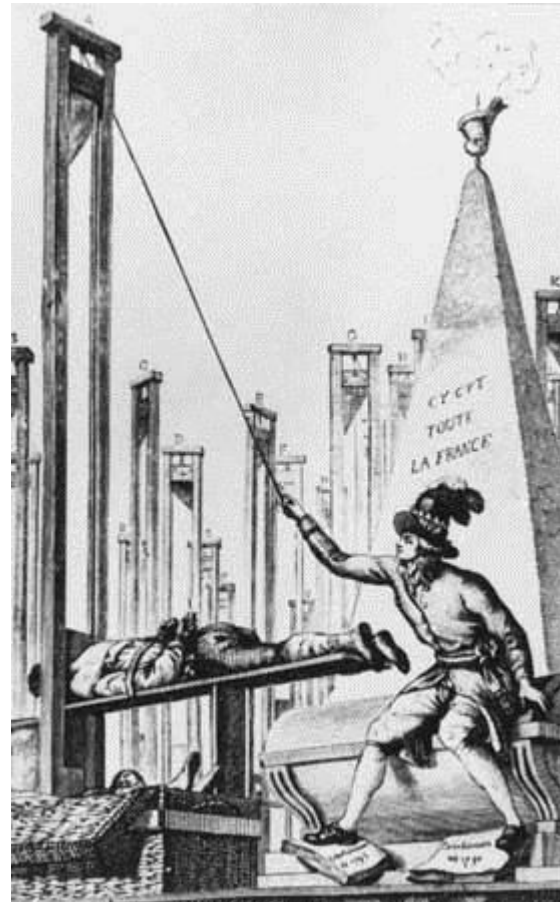
It might safely be said that never in human history, or at least never prior to 1799, had so much been achieved by one people in such a short span of time! Yet...the impressive list of achievements must be balanced against the actual accomplishments.

Politically, constitutionalism had been accepted, but the constitution of 1799 was a farce; declarations of rights had been made three times, but each time they had been more form than substance, and in 1799 they were omitted entirely; democracy had never been really tried. 1799 brought in a dictatorship; the liberties of the subject had been flagrantly violated during the Terror; in 1799 it appeared that equality and security were preferable to liberty; and protection of property had been of little help to the clergy or the émigrés.

Economically, "free" land was a reality only for those who possessed the wherewithal to purchase it; agricultural reforms were still in the future; workers lacked the right to organize and to strike; and the fiscal and financial situation left by the Directory was worse than that facing the Estates General -stability was still lacking.

Source: John Hall Stewart, An Evaluation of the French Revolution.

DOCUMENT B



Cartoon showing Maximilien Robespierre, the French political leader who presided over the Reign of Terror during the French Revolution guillotining the executioner after 'all of France' has been put to death.

DOCUMENT D



“The tables are turned.”

The peasant now rides on the backs of the clergy and nobility, instead of supporting them. He carries the results of a hunt, which was forbidden in the old regime, and says vive le roi (the king) and vive la nation.

DOCUMENT E

The shadow of the Revolution, therefore, fell across the whole of the nineteenth century and beyond. Until 1917 few would have disputed that it was the greatest revolution in the history of the world; and even after that its claims to primacy [dominance] remain strong. After it, nothing in the European world remained the same, and we are all heirs to its influence.

And yet, it can be argued, much that was attributed to it would in all probability have come about in any case. Before 1789 there were plenty of signs that the structure of French society was evolving towards domination by a single elite in which property counted for more than birth.

Meanwhile many of the reforms the Revolution brought in were already being tried or thought about by the absolute monarchy. In the Church, the monastic ideal was already shriveling and the status of parish priests commanding more and more public sympathy. Economically, the colonial trade had already peaked.

The emergencies of the war [with France and Prussia] in turn produced the scenes which have indelibly [permanently] marked our memory of the Revolution: the Terror. Massacres were nothing new, and the worst ones of the 1790s occurred outside France. But there was something horribly new and unimaginable in the prospect of a government systematically executing its opponents by the cartload for months on end, and by a device which, however humane in concept, made the streets run with blood.

SOURCE: William Doyle, historian, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution*, pp. 423-425. Oxford University Press, 1989