In 1792, France was in turmoil. It was the third year of revolution, and instability reigned. Undermined by revolts in the provinces and beset upon by counter-revolutionary armies on all of its frontiers, France’s new leaders desperately sought new ways to instill order among the chaos. The constitutional monarchy established in the Constitution of 1791 had failed to govern the country effectively. Revolutionary violence reached a fever pitch as thousands of imprisoned nobles and clerics were slaughtered in their jail cells in the “September Massacres.” The National Convention had become the default government and voted to dissolve the monarchy. They now had to decide what to do with the deposed and imprisoned king. The Revolution had reached a crisis.

It was during this period that a little-known lawyer and Deputy of the National Convention, Maximilien Robespierre, began his rapid ascent to power. Known early on as “the incorruptible,” Robespierre’s fierce dedication to the principles of the revolution made him a popular figure. His uncompromising ideological allegiance to the purity of virtue and the principles of the revolution made him a popular figure. His willingness to destroy its enemies, led him to embrace bloody, state-sponsored violence to achieve his ends of a utopian state. The consequence was the Terror.

A former opponent of the death penalty, he made powerful arguments in favor of executing Louis XVI, that won him popularity among the revolutionary masses. Many moderates opposed Robespierre’s position, calling instead for a popular referendum on the fate of the king. However, these voices soon were drowned out by the powerful revolutionary rhetoric employed by Robespierre and his allies. Declaring that “Louis must die so that the nation may live,” Robespierre helped convince the Convention to vote for the king’s death. The hopes for moderation in building a just and peaceful revolution died along with the king. Robespierre and many other revolutionaries were bent on destroying the old order in France and ushering in a utopian reign of liberty, equality, and fraternity.

For their part, Robespierre and the faction of political radicals known as the Montagnards became convinced that the tendencies of the moderate group, the Girondists, were not merely hobbling the progress of the revolution, but constituted outright treason. By May 1793, Robespierre called on the Montagnards to rebel against the Girondist-led government and urged the armed people of Paris to forcibly depose Girondist deputies. In June, the Girondists were expelled from the Convention and arrested.

In July 1793, Robespierre took control of the newly-formed Committee of Public Safety. In most initiatives, the Committee was able to bypass the more deliber-
ate National Convention and take direct action as committee members saw fit. Because of these far-reaching powers, the Committee of Public Safety became the de-facto executive of the French Republic, with Robespierre at its helm. Robespierre and his followers could now impose their vision of revolutionary virtue and ideological purity with the power of the state. The search for “enemies of the revolution” and “enemies of the state” soon began in earnest.

In September 1793, Robespierre and the Committee of Public Safety sought to destroy any perceived ideological opponents to the revolution within France. Inspired by a speech by Robespierre, they declared that “terror was the order of the day,” inaugurating the Reign of Terror. This led to the wholesale execution of tens of thousands of political and religious dissidents, rebels, émigrés, common criminals, and anyone suspected of being an enemy of the revolution or failing adequately to embrace it with enough fervor. That same month, the Committee passed the Law of Suspects, naming large swathes of the population as suspected traitors to the revolution. Among those named in the law were “those who, by their conduct, associations, comments, or writings have shown themselves partisans of tyranny or federalism and enemies of liberty,” as well as any nobility and their family who had not displayed sufficient revolutionary ardor. By October 1793, Robespierre and the Committee of Public Safety approvingly watched the execution of the deposed Girondists, their former friends and allies. In December, the Convention granted sole executive authority to the committee, making Robespierre the most powerful man in France. The unhealthy political and civic culture of revolutionary France now fed suspicion of fellow citizens and resulted in a murderous purge of “enemies.” This destruction of enemies of the state would become prevalent in totalitarian regimes in the twentieth century.

The Committee and the Revolutionary Tribunals oversaw the execution of thousands of people by the guillotine who disagreed, or appeared to disagree, with the official policies of Robespierre and the Montagnards. In March 1794, even the Hébertists, a political faction even more extreme than Robespierre, were executed. That same month, Robespierre’s former ally Georges Danton, a well-established Montagnard radical, was executed for publicly critiquing the mandates of the Committee of Public Safety. In the provinces, the Reign of Terror was carried out in gruesomely creative ways. In Nantes, thousands of people were rowed out into the Loire River, weighted with large stones, and drowned en masse. Priests and nuns were especially targeted in this practice that became known as the “Republican Baptism.” In other instances, hundreds of political prisoners were gathered together and mowed down by cannon fire. No one was immune from the revolutionary violence in its pursuit of a pure revolution.

During Robespierre’s reign as the head of the Committee of Public Safety, the barbarity and scope of the Reign of Terror continually widened. The national sense of paranoia came to a crescendo throughout the spring and summer of 1794. On July 26, Robespierre spoke before the Convention and claimed a new conspiracy was afoot to undermine the nation. The deputies in the Convention grew afraid that Robespierre and his supporters intended to execute them on false charges of treason. The next day, the Convention ordered the arrest of Robespierre and several other members of the Committee of Public Safety. On July 28, Robespierre himself was executed by the guillotine, the horrific symbol of the Reign of Terror. A more moderate government was installed in the ensuing Thermidorian Reaction (even though it killed thousands of Catholic rebels in the Vendee), and the Terror was over.
Defining Civic Virtues: Political Intolerance
Disrespect for the different political views of others and violating their inalienable rights