Narrative: Maximilien Robespierre and Injustice

I can analyze the story of Maximilien Robespierre to recognize the dangers of injustice when pursuing ideological purity at the expense of diversity.

Essential Vocabulary

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<th>Injustice</th>
<th>To harm others by applying unequal rules and damaging another’s inalienable rights and dignity.</th>
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<td>Justice</td>
<td>Upholding of what is fair and right. Respecting the rights and dignity of all.</td>
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<td>Incorruptible</td>
<td>Someone or an institution that cannot be caused to be dishonest or act immorally. It is the opposite of corruptible, which is used to describe those who can be corrupted, often easily.</td>
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Narrative

People who are influenced by just ideals and seek change can sometimes cause even greater injustice. This unfortunate turn of events usually occurs when they try to impose reform without prudence or moderation. They can mistakenly believe that their vision is the only correct way to achieve a just society.

The French Revolution began in 1789 with a just vision of a more equal society. The inspirational ideals of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen stated, “men are born and remain free and equal in rights.” The revolution promised the overthrow of the old regime controlled by the monarchy, nobles, and the Catholic Church that revolutionaries claimed was unjust due to their special privileges. Many Americans initially praised the revolution, but were then shocked by the unjust course it took.

In 1792, France was in turmoil. It was the third year of revolution, and instability reigned. Revolts were widespread in the provinces and foreign counter-revolutionary armies were on all its frontiers. Meanwhile, France’s new leaders desperately sought new ways to instill order among the chaos.
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 clergy were slaughtered in their jail cells in the “September Massacres.” The new government — the National Convention — voted to dissolve the monarchy and 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. However, he had an uncompromising ideological allegiance to the purity of virtue and the principles of the revolution. As a result, he set out to destroy its enemies, real or imagined, led him to embrace bloody, state-sponsored violence to achieve his ends of a utopian state.

The consequence was the Reign of Terror. In early 1793, Robespierre supported executing Louis XVI and won popularity among the revolutionary masses. Many moderates opposed Robespierre’s position, but 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 what they believed was a new age of liberty, equality, and fraternity.

For their part, Robespierre and his faction of political radicals became convinced that the views of the moderate group were hobbling the progress of the revolution and even constituted outright treason. By May 1793, Robespierre’s allies rebelled against the moderate government and urged the armed people of Paris to forcibly depose their deputies. In June, the moderates 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 deliberate National Convention and take direct action as committee members saw fit. The committee exercised virtually unlimited powers and effectively became a new government 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. The result was widespread injustice and violation of natural rights.

In September 1793, Robespierre and the Committee of Public Safety sought to destroy any perceived opponents to the revolution within France. Inspired by a speech by Robespierre, they declared that “terror was the order of the day,” and inaugurated the Reign of Terror. This led to the wholesale execution of tens of thousands of political and religious dissidents, rebels, and anyone suspected of being an enemy of the revolution or failing adequately to embrace it with enough fervor. They were killed with the guillotine, which became a symbol of the excesses of the French Revolution and Reign of Terror. That same month, the Committee passed the Law of Suspects, naming large parts 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 support for the revolution.

By October 1793, the deposed moderate politicians were executed. 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.

Outside of Paris, the Reign of Terror was carried out in gruesome ways. In Nantes, thousands of people were rowed out into the Loire River, weighted with large stones, and all drowned. 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 injustice 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 wave of revolutionary violence peaked 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 remaining 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. A more moderate government was installed, and the Terror was over.

The French revolutionaries thought that they were starting a new society rooted in justice and equality. However, Robespierre and many French revolutionaries often went to extremes in creating their new enlightened society. In the process, they created a government characterized by injustice and repressive violence.
Analysis Questions

- What was the situation in France in 1792 that led to the execution of Louis XVI?
- What stance against the old regime drove Robespierre’s support for executing Louis XVI? How would you compare Robespierre to the leaders of the American Revolution and their view of the society that preceded the American Revolution?
- How did the Committee of Public Safety determine whether an individual was an “enemy” of the revolution? What is dangerous about this method? Who was susceptible to being declared an “enemy” of the revolution? What impact did it have on the health of the political culture and civil society of France?
- How did the actions of the Committee of Public Safety contradict their stated beliefs in the revolutionary ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity? How did it fail to uphold justice?
- Did the Terror contradict the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen? Or, can the roots of the Terror be found in the national sovereignty and “general will” of the document? Defend your answer using evidence from the declaration as well as the narrative.
- How did Robespierre and the Committee of Public Safety seek to silence their opponents? Why is it important not to silence your opponents?
- How was the French Revolution unjust?
- Think back to the beginning of this lesson and your thoughts on the American Revolution. What comparisons can you draw between the American Revolution and the French Revolution? Consider the causes of each and the actions and effects of each revolution’s leaders, such as Robespierre and the National Assembly and George Washington and the Continental Congress.