Revision

Terror and the French Revolution

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Consider the following question, then take a look at the sample student response and the examiner's commentary (in red).

Question

What was the most significant reason leading to the Terror in the French Revolution?

Student answer with commentary

The 'Terror' which gripped France from 1792 to 1794 was the result of numerous factors, with varying levels of significance. The power of the sans-culottes, the consolidation of power and position by Robespierre, and counter-revolutionary threats – both from within France and from other European nations – were all important in bringing about the Terror, but counter-revolutionary threats were the most important.

> Although this is only a short introduction, it identifies the period of the Terror and the causes that will be discussed in the essay, offering a view as to the most important. The response might have gone on to identify the different types of Terror: economic, political and religious, as the causes of each could have been analysed.

Counter-revolutionary threats played the most significant role in the Terror. As the threat from invasion from abroad and opposition from within France grew, the need for greater control over resources and prices and stricter security measures led to the Terror, and it is no surprise that the two periods of Terror were associated with the war abroad and the threat to the very existence of the French state. The first period of Terror began with the attack on the Tuileries in August 1792 and ended with the Battle of Valmy, when the allied invasion was finally held up. The second began with the Journée of May 1793 and ended with the execution of Robespierre and his supporters. Once again, at the start of this period of Terror, French armies were doing badly and the country was under threat of invasion, but it ended soon after the victory in Fleurus in June 1794, which secured French frontiers. There were also counter-revolutionary threats within the country, with the Vendée rising against economic and religious changes, taking 3 years to crush fully. This was important as it posed a serious threat to the Revolution, with popular support. Furthermore, guerrilla warfare against the Chouans from 1794, as well as the brutal repression against risings such as the drowning in Nantes, further demonstrate that key moments of Terror took place directly in response to counter-revolutionary threats at home. Facing such challenges, the government wanted to place under observation and punish those suspected of undermining the Revolution and ensure that its orders were carried out.

> A strong argument is advanced as to the importance of counter-revolutionary threats as the most significant cause. The argument is well supported and knowledge of the impact of war on

The growing power and radicalisation of the sans-culottes also played an important role in the Terror. They were seen to have huge power over the CPS and Robespierre, allowing them to influence opinion and control over the enactment of new laws. They dominated Paris and the Paris Commune and wanted more extreme measures than the Assembly deputies, such as food price controls and the extension of the vote. Price rises and food shortages made them more militant. Their support for Robespierre consolidated his position, but they also ensured that harsh measures were taken against any apparent enemies of the Revolution. This led to an increase in the number of convictions and executions in 1793 and 1794. While the number of death sentences in Paris was far less than in the countryside as a whole, with 2,639 sentences in Paris out of a national total of 16,594, mob killings in Paris killed many more people than executions and was much higher than elsewhere – a clear indication of the influence of the sans-culottes.

The role of the sans-culottes in bringing about the Terror is explained and analysed and, as with the previous paragraph, there is some strong support as to their influence and impact. However, although the factor is analysed there is no real evaluation of the significance and relative importance of the factor, and this would need to be developed to reach the very top of the mark range.

Robespierre's ambition and aim to consolidate power was also a key reason for the Terror. His continual turning on allies whenever they disagreed with him – as seen in the purge of the Hébertists over disagreements about de-Christianisation, or the arrest of Danton and labelling as a counter-revolutionary – emphasises that some of the Terror, and who was persecuted, was at the mercy of Robespierre alone, rather than aimed against true counter-revolutionaries. His utilisation of laws extending the definition of a counter-revolutionary, such as the Law of Suspects, allowed him to eliminate opponents. His wish for continued Terror, to supposedly protect the revolution – even after much of the political instability had been calmed in 1794 – indicates that much of the explanation for the Terror was due directly to the wishes of Robespierre. However, it could be argued that as many of the instruments in the Terror, such as the Revolutionary Tribunal, were set up in early 1793 (before he was in a real position of power when he joined the CPS in July 1793), that Robespierre was therefore less instrumental in bringing about the Terror. Despite this, he did greatly utilise these instruments after his rise to power and played a significant role in extending and continuing the use of Terror.

This is a strong paragraph. Not only is the role and influence of Robespierre explained and analysed, but there is a balanced discussion of his role. As with the other paragraphs, the response shows a good knowledge of relevant material, which is used to support the argument. A clear and supported judgement is reached, and this should be used as a model for the previous paragraph.

In conclusion, counter-revolution – both from outside France (with other nations fearful of the threat to their monarchies and political ideals from the new ideas in France) and the reaction of many within France to the developments – was the most important reason for the Terror. Without the threat to the ideals of the Revolution it is unlikely that Robespierre would have been able to pursue his policies. Though he and the CPS were often seen to be at the mercy of the sans-culottes, his manipulation of the power of those he worked with and extension of the use of Terror and his role in power ultimately

make him more significant than the sans-culottes, whose influence was largely confined to Paris. Although Robespierre was able to manipulate what constituted a counter-revolutionary threat to justify his continued use of Terror, the very fact that the Terror started when France and the Revolution was in danger from the armies of other European monarchies and resumed when France faced both external and internal threats shows that it was counter-revolution that was the most important factor in bringing about the Terror, a factor that was exploited by Robespierre in his drive to fulfil his aims and consolidate his power.

> The conclusion is particularly strong. It builds on the view offered in the opening paragraph, displaying a consistent line of argument throughout the response. The relative importance of the three issues or factors discussed in the main body of the essay are weighed up, and comparisons between the importance of the factors are made. The overall judgement reached is strong and has been well supported, ensuring that the response reaches the highest level, but it would not reach the very top due to the lack of evaluation in the main paragraph on the sans-culottes.