Was the Reign of Terror Justified?

The meaning of French Revolution has generated intense debate among historians. One school of thought sees the Revolution as the attempt by the rising bourgeoisie to obtain political power equal to their economic power. Another sees the Revolution as a radical attempt to forcibly remake the world according to the ideals of a small group of men. The Reign of Terror, as the most dramatic event of the Revolution, crystalizes different attitudes towards the French Revolution as a whole.

**Document A**

“[T]he twelve men who formed the Committee of Public Safety, and, as such, governed a divided France during the famous Reign of Terror (as foreigners have persisted in calling it), were an improbable combination brought together by military emergency, who succeeded in turning back, at great cost, the forces of monarchy and aristocracy both French and European, and who simultaneously attempted, in good faith but perhaps in vain, to realize the ideals of the Revolution.”


**Document B**

“What permitted the temporary suspension of the law, and for example the rights of man, was therefore something even beyond public safety—the loftier need to establish society on the virtue of the citizens. . . . [B]efore ruling by the law, it had to regenerate each actor in the new social contract. What, for Rousseau, constituted the transition from man to citizen . . . had become the Revolution’s goal, through the radical action of the revolutionary government.”


**Document C**

“[H]ere we are brought face to face with another question - that of the guilt of the victims of the Terror. . . . On the whole until May or June, 1794, there were fewer innocent victims than commonly supposed: the vast majority were guilty of the charges brought against them. . . . It is the right and duty of governments to put down revolts and to punish treason and espionage; and . . . we must agree that repression was a necessity in 1798 and 1794. . . . There was no “plot,” no premeditated plan to impose a reign of
violence. In the circumstances, no government could have maintained itself without very severe measures of repression. The Terror, after all, was inevitable.”

Greer, Donald. The Incidence of the Terror during the French Revolution A Statistical Interpretation Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 19**. (120, 124, (127 128)

**Document D**

“The Jacobin was not a revolutionary in that he believed in heaven, or even in that he believed in a special kind of heaven, but in that he attempted to realize his heaven here on earth. That attempt led to the Terror. You cannot have disagreement in heaven. When the Jacobin found he could not convert those who disagreed with him, he had to try to exterminate them. La sainte guillotine was not so christened in the spirit of Villon or of Rabelais, but in the spirit of Calvin.”


**Document E**

The Montagnards, a minority in the National Convention, based their power on the big city governments and on the Jacobin clubs from which they quickly expelled their rivals. Since the Montagnards had opposed the War of 1792, the common people could not blame them for the frightful economic crisis the war caused; and they kept in contact with the masses by their social welfare program. The military defeats in the spring of 1793, General Dumouriez’s treason, and the revolt of the Vendée finally allowed them to take power. This was done by force of arms during the three days from May 31 to June 2, 1793. They purged their adversaries from the Convention and very soon organized a dictatorship, a collective dictatorship by two committees—the Committee of Public Safety and the Committee of General Security—both supported by a Convention temporarily in the hands of the Mountain. These events constituted a new revolution. . . . The dictatorship by the committees was really a dictatorship by the Montagnard party and to some degree by the sans-culottes.

This dictatorship, which lasted a little more than a year, was much less the result of a well-thought-out ideology than of inescapable pressures brought on by civil and foreign war. The enemy had to be repulsed, the royalist and Girondin revolts crushed. The cities and the armies, starving because of the English blockade, had to be fed, while the million
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soldiers going to the frontier needed supplies and arms. Terror became the order of the day, and the regime set up the guillotine to deal with its enemies. It suspended elections and sent emissaries with full powers to crush resistance in the provinces. The watchword went out to the generals—victory or death! The statue of liberty was veiled, and authority replaced it in ascendancy. The revolution of the Mountain rested on premises opposed to the individualistic revolution of 1789. In the name of public safety, as formerly in the name of the king, conformity was enforced and property rights were limited when circumstances required. To further the defense of the nation and the Revolution, all provisions were pooled and all kinds of merchandise and food requisitioned. The regime established price ceilings on the most important commodities and opened municipal bakeries and butcher shops. In short, a sort of forced experiment in collectivism was set up. I say a forced experiment, since even those who attempted it considered it only temporary and hoped that it would soon disappear without leaving a trace.


Questions:

1. Which of the historians cited above appear to justify the Reign of Terror? What evidence from the passages support your view?
2. Which of the historians cited above appear to be critical of the Reign of Terror? What evidence from the passages support your view?
3. R. R. Palmer speaks of the ideals of the Revolution. What were those ideals, and can those ideals be reconciled with the Reign of Terror?
4. François Furet mentions Rousseau’s “Social Contract.” What is mean by the term “social contract,” and can a social contract be imposed upon a society?
5. Would you agree with Greer that the probable guilt of most of the victims of the Terror justifies the actions of the government?
6. What does Crane Brinton mean when he writes “La sainte guillotine was not so christened in the spirit of Villon or of Rabelais, but in the spirit of Calvin.” (Hint: What kind of literature did Villon and Rabelais write? For what is Calvin best known.)
7. Review the Questions 1 and 2. With which of the historians above do you most agree? With which do you most disagree?