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RISE AND FALL OF THE RADICAL REVOLUTION

The French Revolution broke upon Europe like a thunderclap. With a few exceptions, notably Britain, Europe in 1789 was governed by absolutist monarchs who viewed their power and legitimacy as a matter of divine right. Royal power varied widely across the Continent, and Enlightenment ideas had influenced some notable rulers like Frederick the Great of Prussia and Joseph II of Austria, who styled themselves "enlightened despots." Nonetheless, the

in the Caribbean prefigured the creation of a sustained *sans-culotte* movement in Paris. Social and racial elites fled from both and tended to portray members of both groups as murderous savages, not freedom fighters. Did the news of slaves battling for liberty in the distant Caribbean, which reached France just as the new Legislative Assembly opened in October 1791, inspire people in France to do the same?

If Europe, the Caribbean, and elsewhere watched the Revolution unfold with bated breath, in 1791 and 1792 the leaders of the movement in France became increasingly aware of their revolutionary nation's place in a conservative world. After the relative calm of the past year and a half, during which the National Assembly had outlined the governing structures of a new French nation, the direction of the Revolution once again became a matter of political conflict in the summer of 1791. Louis XVI precipitated this new crisis. The king had long resented the Revolution but felt powerless to do anything about it. In particular, he refused to take effective action against the émigrés, including his own brothers. On June 20, he decided to join them. Wearing a disguise, he fled Paris in a coach headed for the German border and left behind a manifesto denouncing the Revolution. But authorities in the small town of Varennes recognized him and the queen, and forced them to return under guard to Paris. The flight to Varennes caused an uproar in the National Assembly, with radicals condemning the king as a traitor and calling for the abolition of the monarchy. It also underscored the link between counterrevolution and foreign interests, making the unity of national patriotism and progressive ideology a central theme of the Revolution, a theme that would shape the history of modern France.

The new Legislative Assembly, which opened in October 1791, was dominated by moderates but included substantial numbers of radical republicans, who wished to push the movement further, as well as royalists, who openly hoped for foreign intervention to end the Revolution. The attitude of Europe's monarchs seemed ever more threatening. In August 1791 the kings of Austria and Prussia issued the Declaration of Pilnitz, calling for the restoration of order in France. This, plus continuing agitation by the émigrés in European royal courts, intensified the anger of the French, confirming their fear that the main danger to the Revolution lay abroad. In April 1792 the Legislative Assembly decided to push for war, in spite of the objections of Robespierre, who feared the consequences of a military defeat. Hostility focused on Austria, whose emperor, Leopold II, was the brother of the reviled French queen Marie Antoinette. When Austria refused a French ultimatum

to expel the French émigrés, France declared war on April 20, 1792, precipitating a conflict that would last for over twenty years and establish a key dynamic in modern history: the link between war and revolution.

At first the war went badly, in part because most of the French army's officers were aristocrats whose loyalty to the new regime was shaky at best. A combination of military defeats and continuing economic troubles provoked an upsurge of patriotic activism in Paris. The year 1792 saw the return of the Parisian crowd to active political participation. The *sans-culottes*, representatives of the city's artisans and lower classes who supported the radical left, began mobilizing in the Paris sections and making alliances with progressive members of the Legislative Assembly. They used the celebration of July 14 to mobilize supporters from all over the country to come to the capital and begin plotting to overthrow the monarchy. Parisians were particularly struck by the ardor of the volunteer soldiers from Marseilles, whose marching song, the "Marseillaise," would become the country's national anthem.

A proclamation by the leader of the military alliance against France, the Duke of Brunswick, threatening the French people if any harm should come to Louis XVI, outraged popular opinion to Paris and led the plotters to take action. On August 10, 1792, thousands of *sans-culottes* invaded the royal residence at the Tuileries Palace, massacring some six hundred Swiss guards who defended it. Fearing for their own lives, the deputies voted to abrogate the constitution and hold new elections (based on universal manhood suffrage) for a National Convention. This *journée*, or revolutionary day of action, was followed by another upsurge of violence a few weeks later. During the first week of September, in response to Prussia's capture of the strategic fortress of Verdun, panicked Parisians invaded the city's prisons. Believing that traitors at home were aiding the enemy abroad, they massacred over a thousand prisoners, roughly half of the city's prison population, on frequently trumped-up charges of counterrevolution and treason. The September massacres made it clear that ordinary Parisians were prepared to take not only justice but also politics into their own hands.

The violent actions of the Parisian *sans-culottes* transformed French politics, initiating what many historians have called the Second Revolution. For these militants, the fight against counterrevolution and the war against foreign enemies were one. Volunteers also flooded into the revolutionary armies and on September 20 handed the Prussian and Austrian armies a signal defeat at Valmy, stopping the advance on Paris. The German poet Goethe, who witnessed the fanatical ardor of the French troops, observed that "from here and

today begins a new epoch of world history."[2] A day later the new National Convention met in Paris and immediately voted to abolish the monarchy, establishing the first republic in French history. In a period of political anxiety and threatened invasion, the French people created the political form that would dominate the history of the modern nation.

They did so in a transformed political landscape. Many conservatives and moderates had left the country because of the violence in August and September. The Marquis de Lafayette, leader of French forces in the war for American independence and a strong supporter of the liberal revolution, fled to the Austrian Netherlands. The Jacobins had won the parliamentary elections and consequently dominated the new convention, but they now split into two factions, both mostly composed of middle-class lawyers and professionals. The Girondins, many of whom came from the Gironde department around Bordeaux, supported the republican idea but tended to represent the interests of the bourgeois elites and oppose the radical activism of the *sans-culottes*. In contrast, the Montagnards (so named because its members generally took the highest seats in the convention) frequently supported and worked with Parisian militants. Led by Maximilian Robespierre and the fiery young orator Saint-Just, the Montagnards called for a radical vision of the republic, and their alliance with the *sans-culottes* would make this vision possible.

The fate of Louis XVI also divided the two Jacobin factions. Whereas the Girondins saw no benefit to prosecuting the king further, the Montagnards, bowing to popular anger, insisted on trying him for treason. At his trial in December 1792, Louis XVI denied all charges, but the discovery of letters he had written to sovereigns elsewhere in Europe denouncing the Revolution weakened his defense and hardened the views of many deputies. As a result, the convention voted, by a majority of 380 to 310, to condemn him to death, and he was formally executed by guillotine, "the national razor," in the Place de la Concorde on January 21, 1793. Like the execution of King Charles I in 1649 during the English revolution, putting Louis XVI to death sent a clear message to France and the world that there would be no turning back, that the Revolution, led by the people in arms, would determine the future of the nation.

The execution of Louis XVI horrified the rest of Europe, turning the struggle against revolutionary France into a holy crusade to save civilization. By the spring of 1793 Spain and Britain entered the anti-French coalition, and the Austrians made headway in the Netherlands and along the Rhine. Moreover, a massive internal revolt confronted the convention. In March, peasants in the

deeply Catholic region of the Vendée, in the west, rose up in revolt against the national government, spurred on by hatred of the attacks against the Church and attempts to draft local men into the army. At the same time continued poor harvests and inflation sapped working-class living standards, stoking popular anger in Paris and across the country. At the end of May units of the Parisian National Guard, controlled by the *sans-culottes*, invaded the convention and forced the ouster of the Girondins, leaving the Montagnards in control of the government. Two-thirds of French departments protested their expulsion, and the Girondin leaders fled to their strongholds in the provinces, instigating revolts against Paris in Caen, Bordeaux, Marseilles, and Lyon. The Revolution had entered its darkest hour.

Far from compromising its ideals and policies, the convention responded to the crisis with a *fuite en avant*, a series of new laws and policies that increased the radicalism of the movement. In April it appointed a Committee of Public Safety to lead the war effort, a small group that in July would come under the control of Robespierre and form an effective dictatorship. In August, the convention responded to the threat of foreign invasion and domestic counterrevolution with the *levée en masse*, a modern system of conscription that created new revolutionary armies of unprecedented size. In September, abandoning economic liberalism in order to retain the loyalty of the *sans-culottes*, the convention passed the Maximum, fixing the price of wheat and other food staples; speculation in the price of grain became a capital crime. These and other measures centralized government control over France, anticipating the welfare and military policies of twentieth-century nation-states.

These new radical policies became collectively known as the Terror, symbolizing the wrath of the Revolution militant. In particular, the Terror referred to the trials and executions of those suspected of counterrevolutionary activities. In September the convention passed the Law on Suspects, giving the government broad new powers to arrest suspects and defining as traitors those who emigrated or failed to prove their patriotism sufficiently. Under this law a revolutionary tribunal guillotined several thousand French women and men in Paris and the provinces. Many more were imprisoned, and over 100,000 fled France. In October 1793 the government guillotined Queen Marie Antoinette for treason. Although the Terror focused at first on nobles and refractory priests, it mostly took the lives of members of the lower classes whose patriotism was in question. In November, for example, the government executed Olympe de Gouges, a self-educated butcher's daughter who came under suspicion because of her ties to the Girondins.

The Terror was not just a policy of political repression, however; it looked to the radical remaking of France as a nation and as a culture. Cultural change had been a key part of the Revolution ever since 1789. In the aftermath of the seizure of the Bastille revolutionaries planted "liberty trees," ceremonial poles, throughout France and founded ceremonies to celebrate the movement. On July 14, 1790, a national Festival of Federation inaugurated the tradition of celebrating Bastille Day. Under Montagnard rule, however, government attempts to eradicate all aspects of the ancien régime took cultural change to an unprecedented level. The heart of this effort was a massive program of de-Christianization. For example, the convention replaced the traditional Christian calendar with a new revolutionary one, divided into twelve months with names like Floréal and Brumaire (based on the seasons), and divided the month into three ten-day weeks. The revolutionary leaders even created a Cult of Reason to replace Christianity, and in November 1793 turned Notre Dame Cathedral into a temple of reason, consecrated with a ceremony in honor of the goddess of liberty. Activists also pressured priests to renounce their vows and to marry. Across France revolutionaries destroyed religious statues, books, and churches.

De-Christianization was just one aspect of the politicization of everyday life under the Revolution. Public names referring to the Church or the monarchy were changed, so that in far-off Martinique the city of Fort Royal became Fort-de-France. In daily discourse people dropped the formal *vous* for the more comradely *tu,* or "Citizen." Wearing the revolutionary cockade, colored red, white, and blue, became a prudent means of demonstrating personal patriotism. Ostentatious displays of wealth frequently gave rise to suspicion of aristocratic leanings, so dressing down became the order of the day. In regions like Provence or Alsace, where people spoke languages other than Parisian French, learning French became a symbol of patriotism, and the refusal (or inability) to speak it a possible sign of counterrevolutionary tendencies. During the Terror, therefore, revolutionary commitment went beyond politics to become a way of life.

These changes were important to many, but the ultimate task of the Terror was to defeat the Revolution's enemies. The *levée en masse* created a huge new French military force, some 700,000 strong. This plus the application of ruthless discipline and the promotion of skilled younger officers enabled the French to turn the tide by the end of 1793, even though they were at war with most of the major European powers. By the summer of 1794 French forces mounted an offensive in the Austrian Netherlands, the Rhine valley, and

Savoy. The convention portrayed its conquest of these areas as a revolutionary war of liberation against despotism. Some local inhabitants concurred and worked with the French, but others saw the French presence as an occupation rather than an emancipation. The convention also succeeded in defeating insurgencies at home, largely thanks to the disorganization of its opponents. Revolutionary armies, sometimes with guillotines mounted on wheels, rampaged across France, burning towns and fields and imprisoning thousands of suspects. The war against the Vendée revolt was particularly brutal: at one point government troops threw several thousand insurgents into the Loire River to drown.

The Terror has gone down in history as an evil, bloody dictatorship, yet for many French men and women at the time it represented the most just regime they had ever lived under. The Terror treated opponents or suspected opponents with brutality, but it won the loyalty of the *sans-culottes* and many others by its measures to support the poor, and by its embrace of patriotism. The Maximum kept the price of bread down, making life far easier for the poor who depended on it. The convention also tended to favor the interests of peasants over landlords, and went so far as to suggest that land confiscated from those convicted of treason should be given free to the poor. Above all, the convention's successful prosecution of the war showed its ability and determination to defend the Revolution against all enemies. For the *sans-culottes* and their allies, the bread of freedom had to be watered with the blood of the oppressors, and the Terror's willingness to do just that ensured their support.

The image of the Terror as a symbol of liberty becomes clearer if we look to the Caribbean. While tentatively offering equal status to the free people of color in Saint-Domingue, the Legislative Assembly did nothing to address the raging slave revolt or the conditions that had created it. In February 1794, however, in defiance of orthodox opinion in much of Europe as well as the young United States, the convention formally abolished slavery in the French empire and offered citizenship to (male) former slaves. More than that, the convention sent a fleet to the Caribbean to retake Martinique and Guadeloupe from the British and free the slaves there as well. In alliance with the rebel slaves of Saint-Domingue, led by the remarkable general Toussaint L'Ouverture, the French freed their islands from British control and briefly invaded the island of Saint-Vincent in support of a slave revolt there. Although Napoleon would later reverse French support of the Saint-Domingue slaves, the actions of the convention left a powerful legacy, convincing the people of the French Caribbean that the republic equaled liberty.

The Revolution's impact in the Caribbean and the Americas as a whole spread far beyond France's own territories. In an area dominated and shaped by the Atlantic slave trade, the question of African slavery and the resistance to it dominated public life, and no event in history mobilized people around it like the French Revolution. The combination of the Revolution's high-flown rhetoric about liberty and the massive war for freedom in Saint-Domingue threw the entire region into turmoil. Slave revolts had erupted throughout the Caribbean basin ever since the beginnings of African slavery, and in many ways the uprising in Saint-Domingue was merely the latest and most powerful example.

The Revolution in the Caribbean also drew inspiration from another local tradition: piracy. Pirates ranged far and wide across the Caribbean during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, terrorizing the established order and holding forth an alternate vision of liberty. Pirate ships, whose crews frequently included escaped slaves, were generally run along democratic lines, emphasizing the equal rights of all. Long before the taking of the Bastille, a libertarian model of equality flourished on the high seas of the Americas. In building on the (often brutal) heritage of both slave insurgencies and pirate ships, the revolutionary Caribbean illustrated how people far from Paris interpreted the French Revolution according to their own ideas and desires.

In short, the Terror brutalized many, but to many more it held out the prospect of a brilliant future of liberty, equality, and fraternity. In spite of this support, however, the Terror did not last much more than a year. The Committee of Public Safety increasingly lost the ability to distinguish between political opponents and traitors, so that even after the dangers of invasion and counterrevolution had been tamed it continued to arrest suspects and guillotine people from all walks of French society. Repression reached its height in June and July of 1794, a period known as the Great Terror, after the revolutionary armies had scored signal victories on all fronts. In April 1794 the Committee tried and executed the so-called Indulgents, those who wanted to rein in the Terror, including famous and committed revolutionaries like Georges Danton and Camille Desmoulins.

Perhaps more importantly, the Terror also began attacking the leadership of the *sans-culottes*, bringing them more firmly under the control of the convention. At the end of 1793 it began banning popular clubs, especially those organized by women. In March 1794 the committee executed the journalist Hébert, leader of the Ultras, and his followers. This step effectively demobilized the *sans-culottes*, which meant they could no longer threaten the

Jacobins' control of the convention, but also meant that they could no longer support them against their enemies on the right. It broke the unity between radical politicians and popular activists, with fateful consequences.

The end came swiftly. On July 27, 1794 (the ninth day of Thermidor according to the revolutionary calendar), convention deputies arrested Robespierre, Saint-Just, and their associates, fearing yet another round of executions. The demobilization of the *sans-culottes* movement prevented them from mounting any effective resistance, and the leaders of the Committee of Public Safety met their fate on the guillotine. The fall of Robespierre unleashed a massive counterreaction, as the victors moved to dismantle the edifice of terror. They released large numbers of political prisoners from jail, abolished the Revolutionary Tribunal, and banned the Jacobin Club in Paris. They also terminated the Maximum, setting off the runaway inflation of grain prices. The Thermidorians soon found they had unleashed a powerful movement beyond their control, as some of those victimized by the Terror now sought revenge. Upper-class youth known as the *jeunesse dorée* went on the rampage, beating and even killing Jacobin militants throughout France. The violent political repression and the tremendous economic distress of the poor prompted one more Parisian *journée*, when *sans-culottes* invaded the convention, but soldiers and vigilantes easily suppressed the movement. Clearly the radical Revolution was over.

What would follow was less clear. Those who overthrew Robespierre and the Jacobin dictatorship wanted to continue the Revolution, but they disagreed about the form it should take. Moreover, the swing of the political pendulum back to the center allowed those who rejected the Revolution altogether to press their ideas in public debate. To guard against a return to authoritarian radicalism, after Thermidor the convention drafted a new constitution that sharply restricted the democratic character of French politics. It abolished universal manhood suffrage, restricting the franchise to the wealthy. The new constitution also created a bicameral legislature, a Council of 500 and a Council of Elders, whose structure promoted conservative stability over revolutionary innovation. It vested executive authority in a committee of five directors whose title, the Directory, gave the new regime its name. This was a regime created to safeguard bourgeois interests and fortunes, and to exclude most French people from the kind of political activism that had shaped the radical Republic.

During its four years in power, 1795–1799, the Directory sought a middle way between the excesses of Jacobinism and royalism. As is often the case in

such situations, the regime succeeded in pleasing neither side, and consequently has been judged wanting. Yet as some historians have noted, the new regime did score solid successes. It was able to curb the runaway inflation of the previous years by returning to a metal currency and writing off much of the public debt. It also succeeded in rationalizing tax collection, the issue that had touched off the Revolution in the first place. Moreover, it created a network of leading educational institutions, such as new medical schools and the Ecole polytechnique, that made Paris a world center of scientific scholarship.

Another success of the Directory, yet one that ultimately proved its Achilles' heel, was the prosecution of the war. The last years of the Jacobin regime had seen the revolutionary armies take the offense on a number of fronts. France's armies, the largest in Europe thanks to the *levée en masse*, had become well trained and professional as the old aristocratic leadership gave way to the new citizen's military. This progress continued under the Directory, so that in 1795 France conquered the Netherlands and in following years scored important victories in Germany and Italy.

Yet in spite of a strong economy at home and military victories abroad, the Directory remained vulnerable to attacks from both left and right. Royalists attempted two insurrections in 1795: a landing of émigré nobles in Brittany in June and an armed uprising in Paris in October. In May 1796 the Directory arrested Gracchus Babeuf, leader of the Conspiracy of Equals, who plotted to overthrow the regime and return to the social egalitarianism of *sans-culotte* ideology. In 1797 royalists won big in the elections to the Council of 500, prompting the directors to annul the results. They did the same thing in 1798 when neo-Jacobins in their turn won several seats. Even in good times, therefore, the Directory failed to create the solid center that would support it, and the good times did not last. By 1798 the economy had once again turned sour, increasing discontent throughout French society. Moreover, a powerful new European coalition against France, involving Britain, Austria, and Russia, dealt a series of major defeats to French forces, leading to the prospect of a military collapse. By 1799 the Directory was clearly falling apart, and the only question was what would replace it.

The answer came soon enough. One effect of the revolutionary wars was to produce a new crop of capable young officers who had risen through the ranks thanks to their own talents. Among these the Revolution would find its man of destiny. Napoleon Bonaparte, the product of the minor nobility from the backwater island of Corsica, was physically unimpressive but gifted

with a powerful personality that made him a natural leader. Born in 1768, he attended military school in Paris and joined the army as an artillery officer; unlike many aristocrats, he remained in the army after the Revolution broke out. He first attracted the attention of the army leadership with his brilliant conquest of Toulon, which had fallen to opposition forces, in 1793. Napoleon continued his rise to power under the Directory, winning renown for suppressing the royalist revolt of October 1795. The Directory sent him to command the revolutionary army in Italy, where against all expectations he crushed the Austrians and made France the dominant military power. Next the Directory sent Napoleon to invade Egypt, hoping both to cut Britain's links with India and to send the increasingly popular general as far away from Paris as possible. In July 1798 Bonaparte arrived in Egypt, quickly conquering Alexandria and Cairo. However, the British navy under Admiral Nelson moved into position, trapping Bonaparte's forces. Faced with this, Napoleon deserted his forces in Egypt and secretly returned to France alone.

Napoleon came back to Paris in October 1799, where he was hailed as a hero, the conqueror of Italy and Egypt. Just thirty years old, he symbolized dynamism and the future. He arrived at a time when the Directory was largely discredited and many were looking for alternatives. One of these was the Abbé Sieyès, who after pursuing a complicated trajectory during the Revolution (he later said his main accomplishment was that he survived) had become a director in June. He had decided that the Revolution needed a strongman to put things right, and he thought Napoleon would be the perfect candidate, vastly popular but also young and inexperienced enough to be controlled. He approached Napoleon, who agreed to support Sieyès and his co-conspirators. They appointed Bonaparte commander in chief of the army in Paris. On November 9, 1799 (or, on the revolutionary calendar, Brumaire 18) Napoleon's troops surrounded the convention and forced it to vote full power to a new government of three consuls: Napoleon, Sieyès, and fellow director Roger Ducos. Much to Sieyès's surprise, Bonaparte soon made it clear that he was no one's puppet, and his control of the army ensured his control of the nation. Once again, following a key trope of the Revolution, warfare abroad determined the political situation at home. No riots or insurrections greeted Napoleon's seizure of power, as the Directory passed into history largely unlamented. In December a plebiscite approved the new regime, the Consulate, by nearly 100 percent of all votes cast. A new era had begun, and for the next fifteen years Napoleon Bonaparte would reign unchallenged as the master of France.

TRANSNATIONAL
FRANCE

The Modern History of a Universal Nation

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University of California, Santa Cruz

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