
FRENCH REVOLUTION. France’s involvement in the war of independence waged by Britain’s North American colonies from 1775 to 1783 partially revenged the humiliations Britain had inflicted on France in India, Canada, and the Caribbean; the war, however, cost France over one billion livres, more than twice the usual annual revenue of the state. As the royal state sank into financial crisis after 1783, the costs of servicing this massive debt impelled the monarchy to seek ways of ending noble immunity from taxation and the capacity of noble-dominated high courts (parlements) to resist royal decrees to that end.

Historians agree that it was this financial crisis that erected the stage on which the French Revolution of 1789 was enacted. They do not agree, however, on whether this was only the immediate cause of a much longer and deeper crisis within French society. Were the long-term pressures of royal state-making that fueled pressures to remove the nobility’s fiscal immunities paralleled by another challenge to the nobility, from a wealthier, larger, and more critical bourgeoisie and a disaffected peasantry? If this was not the case, it could be argued that there was no deep-seated, long-term crisis within this society, that the Revolution

had only short-term and therefore relatively unimportant causes, and that it was therefore avoidable.

Since the early 1990s some historians have seen debates about the socioeconomic origins of the Revolution as moribund and have contested the applicability of terms such as *class* and *class-consciousness* to eighteenth-century France. Instead, they have argued that the origins and nature of the Revolution are best observed through an analysis of “political culture,” especially the emerging sphere of “public opinion.” Other historians have focused on the “material culture” of eighteenth-century France, that is, the material objects and practices of daily life. From this research it seems clear that a series of interrelated changes—economic, social, and cultural—was undermining the bases of social and political authority in the second half of the eighteenth century. The limited but highly visible expansion of capitalist enterprise in industry and in agriculture in the outskirts of major cities, and above all the growth of commerce, linked to the colonial trade, was generating forms of wealth and values at odds with the institutional bases of absolutism, corporate privilege, and the claims to authority of the nobility and church. The most articulate statements of these challenges to established forms of politics and religion are known as the Enlightenment. Well before 1789, a language of “citizen,” “nation,” “social contract,” and “general will” was being articulated across French society, clashing with an older discourse of “orders,” “estates,” and “corporations.”

The lively world of literature in the 1780s was essentially an urban phenomenon: most men and women in towns could read. There is little sign of an “Enlightenment” in the countryside. Nevertheless, rural France was in crisis in the 1780s, because of the rapid increase in rents owing to long-term increases in agricultural productivity and population, and in some areas to the collapse of the textile industry following the free trade treaty with England in 1786. While the surviving traces of the feudal regime were relatively light in some regions, resentment of seignorial prerogatives everywhere bonded rural communities together against their lords.

During 1787 and 1788 royal ministers made successive attempts to persuade meetings of the

most prominent “Notables” to agree to lift the fiscal privileges of the nobility, or Second Estate. These foundered on the nobility’s insistence that only a gathering of representatives of the three orders (clergy, nobility, commons) as an Estates-General could agree to such innovation. Tension between crown and nobility came to a head in August 1788, with the parlements insisting that the measures King Louis XVI’s ministry sought to impose amounted to “royal despotism.” In such a situation, both sides looked to an Estates-General to provide legitimacy for their claims. They were both mistaken. Instead, the calling of the Estates-General for May 1789 facilitated the expression of tensions at every level of French society. The remarkable vibrancy of debate in the months before May 1789 was facilitated by the suspension of press censorship and the publication of several thousand political pamphlets. This war of words was fueled by Louis’s indecision about the procedures to be followed at Versailles. Would representatives of the three orders meet separately, as at the previous meeting in 1614, or in a single chamber? Louis’s decision on 27 December to double the size of the Third Estate representation served to highlight further this crucial issue of political power, because he remained silent on how voting would occur.

In the spring of 1789, people all over France were required to elect deputies to the Estates-General and to formulate proposals for the reform of public life by compiling “lists of grievances.” The drawing up of these *cahiers de doléances* in the context of subsistence crisis, political uncertainty, and fiscal chaos was the decisive moment in the mass politicization of social friction. At least on the surface, the *cahiers* of all three orders show a remarkable level of agreement: they assumed that the meeting of the Estates-General in May would be but the first of a regular cycle; and they saw the need for sweeping reform to taxation, the judiciary, the Catholic Church, and administration. On fundamental matters of social order and political power, however, entrenched divisions were to undermine the possibilities of consensual reform. Rural communities and the nobility were in sharp disagreement about seignorial dues, and bourgeois across the country challenged the nobility by advocating “careers



A pro-revolution cartoon c. 1789. A peasant woman is shown carrying a nun and an aristocrat on her back; the caption reads "Let's hope that this game ends soon."

RÉUNION DES MUSÉES NATIONAUX/ART RESOURCE, NY

open to talent," equality of taxation, and the ending of privilege. Many parish priests agreed with the commons about taxation reform in particular, while insisting on the prerogatives of their own order.

THE REVOLUTION OF 1789

Some 208 of the 303 First Estate deputies were lower clergy; only 51 of the 176 bishops had been elected as delegates. Most of the 282 noble deputies were provincial men prominent in their districts. The 646 Third Estate deputies were almost all officials, professionals, and men of property. The latter body of delegates rapidly developed a common outlook, insistent on their dignity and responsibility to "the Nation"; they refused to meet in a separate chamber, and on 17 June proclaimed themselves the National

Assembly. This was the first revolutionary challenge to absolutism and privilege. Louis appeared to capitulate, ordering all deputies to meet in a common assembly, but at the same time he invested Paris, 16 kilometers (10 miles) from Versailles and a crucible of revolutionary enthusiasm, with twenty thousand mercenaries.

The National Assembly was saved from probable dissolution only by a collective action of Parisian working people, angry at an escalation in the price of bread, and certain that the assembly was under military threat. Arms and ammunition were seized from gunsmiths and the Invalides military hospital. The main target was the Bastille fortress in the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, known to have supplies of arms and gunpowder; it was also an awesome symbol of the arbitrary authority of the monarchy. The seizure of the Bastille on 14 July not only saved the National Assembly, it also strengthened the calls for change elsewhere in the country. In communities all over France, "patriots" seized control of local government. News of the storming of the Bastille reached a countryside simmering with conflict, hope, and fear: the harvest failure in 1788 had been followed by a harsh winter, and widespread hunger as crops ripened was matched by hopes invested in the Estates-General. In what became known as the Great Fear, rumors swept the countryside of nobles taking revenge in the wake of the Parisian revolution by hiring "brigands" to destroy crops. When the acts of revenge failed to materialize, armed peasant militias seized foodstuffs or compelled seigneurs or their agents to hand over feudal registers.

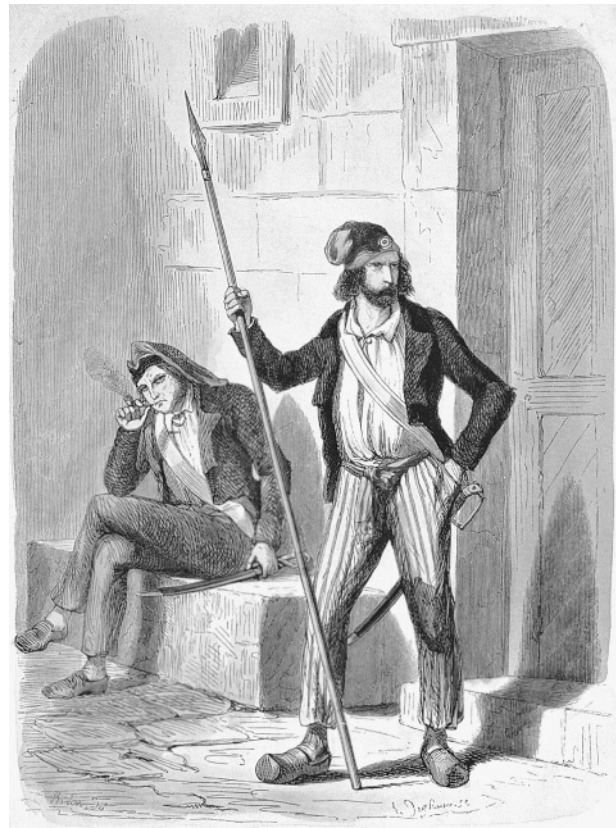
On the night of 4 August, panic-stricken nobles mounted the rostrum of the National Assembly to respond to the Great Fear by renouncing their privileges and abolishing feudal dues. In the succeeding week, however, they made a distinction between instances of "personal servitude," which were abolished outright, and "property rights" (especially seignorial dues payable on harvests) for which peasants would have to pay compensation before ceasing payment. This distinction was to fuel ongoing peasant revolt for the next three years.

Later, on 27 August, the National Assembly voted its Declaration of the Rights of Man and of

the Citizen. Fundamental to the declaration was the assertion of the essence of liberalism, that “liberty consists of the power to do whatever is not injurious to others.” The declaration guaranteed rights of free speech and association, of religion and opinion. This was to be a nation in which all were to be equal in legal status, and subject to the same public responsibilities: it was an invitation to become citizens of a nation instead of subjects of a king. The August decrees and the Declaration of the Rights of Man together marked the end of the absolutist, seignorial, and corporate structure of eighteenth-century France. They were also a revolutionary proclamation of the principles of a new golden age. But, while the declaration proclaimed the universality of rights and the civic equality of all citizens, it was ambiguous on whether the propertyless, slaves, and women would have political as well as legal equality, and was silent on how the means to exercise one’s talents could be secured by those without the education or property necessary to do so.

Both the August decrees and the declaration met with refusal from Louis. The Estates-General had been summoned to offer him advice on the state of his kingdom: did his acceptance of the existence of a “National Assembly” require him to accept its decisions? Once again the standing of the National Assembly seemed in question. This time it was the market women of Paris who took the initiative, convinced that the king had to sanction the decrees and return to Paris: in this way they believed that the noble conspiracy to starve Paris would be broken. Louis did so on 6 October. Later he married the white of the Bourbon family to the blue and red of Paris to symbolize the unity of king and nation. The Revolution seemed secure and complete, but Louis’s reluctant consent to change was only thinly disguised by the fiction that his obstinacy was solely due to the malign influence of his court.

Elsewhere in Europe and America, people were struck by the dramatic events of the summer. Few failed to be enthused by them, despite news of bloodshed. Among the crowned heads of Europe, only the kings of Sweden and Spain and Catherine the Great of Russia were resolutely hostile from the outset. Others may have felt a certain pleasure at seeing one of Europe’s Great Powers incommode



The Sans-Culotte. Undated French lithograph depicting a supporter of the revolution with his clogs and red Phrygian cap guarding a captive aristocrat. The term *sans-culottes* derived from the fact that members of the working and lower classes wore plain long trousers rather than the knee breeches, or *culottes*, favored by the wealthy. BIBLIOTHÈQUE DES ARTS DÉCORATIFS, PARIS, FRANCE/BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY/ARCHIVES CHARMET

by its own people. Among the general American and European populaces, however, support for the Revolution was widespread, and initially there were few outspoken “counterrevolutionaries” such as Edmund Burke.

The euphoria of the autumn of 1789 was tempered by awareness of the magnitude of what remained to be done. The revolutionaries’ declaration of the principles of the new regime presupposed that every aspect of public life would be reshaped. The *ancien régime*, as it was now called, had been overthrown, but what was to be put in its place?

THE RECONSTRUCTION OF FRANCE, 1789–1791

Over the next two years, the deputies threw themselves into the task of reworking every dimension of

public life. The reconstruction of France was based on a belief in the equal status of French citizens whatever their social or geographic origin. In every aspect of public life—administration, the judiciary, taxation, the armed forces, the church, policing—a system of corporate rights, appointment, and hierarchy gave way to civil equality, accountability, and popular sovereignty. The institutional structure of the *ancien régime* had been characterized by extraordinary provincial diversity controlled by a network of royal appointees. Now this was reversed: at every level officials were to be elected, but the institutions in which they worked were everywhere to be the same. The institutional bedrock would be the forty-one thousand new “communes,” mostly based on the parishes of the *ancien régime*, the base of a hierarchy of cantons, districts, and eighty-three departments.

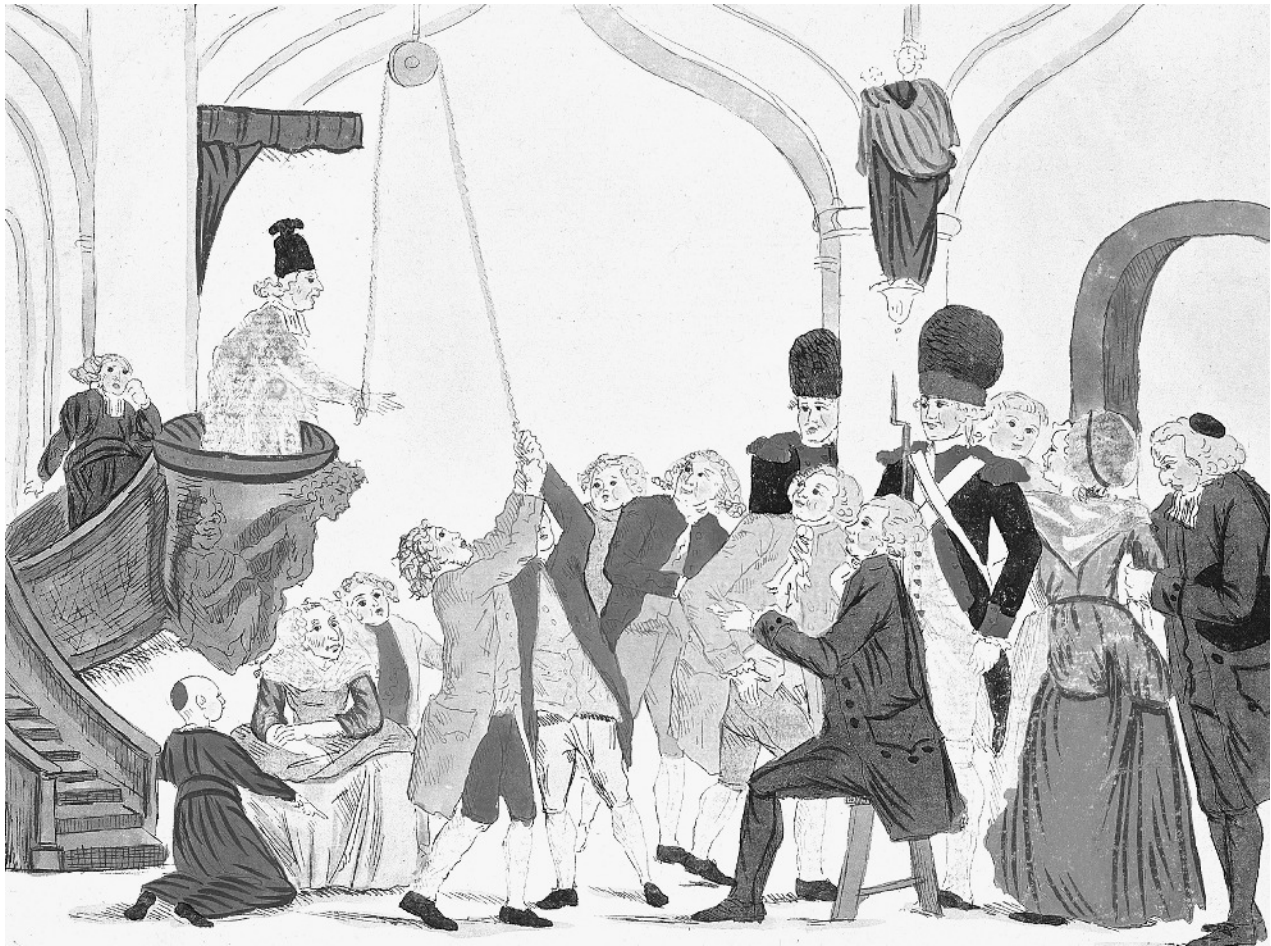
The complex set of royal, aristocratic, and clerical courts and their regional variants was replaced by a national system deliberately made more accessible, humane, and egalitarian. In particular, the introduction of elected justices of the peace in every canton was immensely popular for its provision of cheap and accessible justice. The number of capital offenses was sharply reduced, and the punishment for them would be a style of decapitation perfected by a deputy, the Parisian doctor Joseph Guillotin, and accepted as humane by the National Assembly. This vast project of creating a new legal framework was matched by a zeal for individual rights. By the end of 1789 full citizenship had been granted to Protestants and, by the following January, to the Sephardic Jews of Bordeaux and Avignon. The latter was passed only by 374 votes to 280, however, and the Ashkenazic Jews of the east had to wait until September 1791 for equal recognition.

From the outset the ideals of liberty and equality were compromised by pragmatic considerations of vested interests. Neither poorer men—dubbed “passive” citizens—nor women were judged capable of exercising sovereign rights. A similar hesitancy was expressed over whether the principles of 1789 should be extended to the Caribbean colonies. A bitter debate pitted the colonial lobby (the Club Massiac) against the Société des amis des Noirs (Society of the Friends of the Blacks), which included Jacques-Pierre Brissot and Maximilien

Robespierre. In May 1791 the National Assembly granted “active” citizen status to free blacks with free parents and the necessary property, but avoided the issues of slavery and the slave trade.

The National Assembly had inherited the monarchy’s bankruptcy, and this pressing problem was now aggravated by popular refusal to pay taxes. Several measures were taken to meet this crisis. In November 1789 the vast church lands were nationalized and, from November 1790, sold at auction, mainly to local bourgeois and the wealthiest peasants. These sales were also used to back the issue of assignats, a paper currency that soon began to decline in real purchasing power. Fiscal exemptions were finally ended by a new system of taxation, based on the estimated value of and income from property, introduced from the beginning of 1791.

Until 1791 the Revolution was overwhelmingly popular: sweeping changes in public life occurred within a context of mass optimism and support. The Festival of the Federation, on the first anniversary of the storming of the Bastille, celebrated the unity of church, monarchy, and Revolution. Two days earlier, however, the National Assembly had voted a reform that was to shatter this unity. The widespread agreement in the *cahiers* on the need for reform guaranteed that the National Assembly had been able to push through the nationalization of church lands, the closing of contemplative orders, and the granting of religious liberty to Protestants and Jews. Mounting clerical opposition to these changes ultimately focused on the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, adopted on 12 July 1790. Many priests were materially advantaged by the new salary scale, and only the upper clergy would have regretted that bishops’ stipends were dramatically reduced. Most contentious, however, was the issue of how the clergy were to be appointed in the future: in requiring the election of priests and bishops, the National Assembly crossed the line separating temporal and spiritual life. In the end, it would prove impossible to reconcile a church based on divinely revealed truth and hierarchical authority, and a certainty of one true faith, with a Revolution based on popular sovereignty, religious tolerance, and the certainty of earthly fulfillment through the application of secular reason.



The Method of Making Aristocratic Bishops and Priests Swear Allegiance to the Civil Constitution in the Presence of the Municipalities according to the Decree of the National Assembly. Undated cartoon. The reluctance of Catholic clergy to submit to the demands of the secular revolutionary state became a major concern for republican authorities, while lingering pro-religious sentiment led to divisions among the citizenry. BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE, PARIS, FRANCE/BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY/LAURENCE/GIRAUDON

Parish priests were required to take a civic oath in order to continue their functions, and their difficult choice—felt as one between loyalty to the Revolution and loyalty to God and the pope—was often influenced by parishioner sentiment. By mid-1791 two Frances had emerged, the pro-reform areas of the southeast, the Paris basin, and much of the center contrasting with the west and southwest, much of the north and east, and the southern Massif Central. The strength of refractory, or non-oath-taking (“non-juring”), clergy in border areas fed Parisian suspicions that peasants who could not understand French were prey to the “superstitions” of their “fanatical” priests.

Everywhere, the birth of new systems of administration within a context of popular sovereignty and hectic legislative activity was part of the creation of a revolutionary political culture. The work of the National Assembly was vast in scope and energy. The foundations of a new social order were laid, underpinned by an assumption of the national unity of a fraternity of citizens. This was a revolutionary transformation of public life. At the same time, the Assembly was walking a tightrope. On one side lay a growing hostility from nobles and the elite of the church angered by the loss of status, wealth, and privilege, and bolstered in many areas by a disillusioned parish clergy and their parishioners. On the other side, the National

Assembly was alienating itself from the popular base of the Revolution by its compromise on feudal dues, its exclusion of the “passive” citizens from the political process, and its implementation of economic liberalism.

One element of the new political culture was the many thousands of political clubs established in the early years of the Revolution, the most famous of which was the Jacobin Club of Paris, known by the name of its premises in a former convent. Many of these clubs catered to “passive” citizens. In 1791 active democrats among the *menu peuple* (common people) became widely known by a new term, *sans-culottes*, which was both a political label for a militant patriot and a social description signifying men of the people who did not wear the knee breeches and stockings of the upper classes.

Ever since July 1789 the National Assembly had had to face a double challenge: How could the Revolution be protected from its opponents? Whose Revolution was it to be? These questions came to a head in mid-1791. Louis fled Paris on 21 June, publicly repudiating the direction the Revolution had taken, especially in reforms to the church. On the evening of the next day, Louis was recognized in a village near the eastern frontier and arrested. Although he was suspended temporarily from his position as king, the National Assembly was determined to quell any popular unrest that might threaten the constitutional monarchy. On 17 July, an unarmed demonstration to demand Louis’s abdication was organized on the Champ-de-Mars by the democratic Club of the Cordeliers, with some Jacobin support, at the same “altar of the homeland” on which the Festival of the Federation had been celebrated a year earlier. The marquis de Lafayette, the commander of the National Guard, was ordered to disperse the petitioners; his guardsmen killed perhaps fifty of them.

On 14 September an apparently sincere Louis promulgated the Constitution that embodied the National Assembly’s work since 1789. France was to be a constitutional monarchy in which power was shared between the king, as head of the executive, and a legislative assembly elected by a restrictive property franchise. The issues of his loyalty and of whether the Revolution was over were, however, far from resolved.

It was in this highly charged context that a new Legislative Assembly was elected and convened in Paris in October 1791. At the outset most of its members sought to consolidate the state of the Revolution as expressed in the Constitution, and deserted the Jacobin Club for the Feuillants, a club similarly named after its meeting place in a former convent. Growing anxiety about the opposing threats of popular radicalism and counterrevolution, on the one hand, and bellicose posturing from European rulers, on the other, was to convince the Legislative Assembly that the Revolution and France itself were in danger.

A SECOND REVOLUTION, 1792

A key element in this unease was the rebellion of hundreds of thousands of mulattoes and slaves in Saint Domingue, beginning in August 1791. The Legislative Assembly responded in April 1792 by extending civil equality to all “free persons of color.” The slave revolt in the Caribbean colonies so important to the French economy further convinced the deputies of the insidious intentions of France’s rivals, England and Spain.

The Jacobin followers of Brissot argued that the Revolution would not be safe until this foreign threat was destroyed and the loyalty of French citizens to the Constitution demonstrated by a patriotic war against internal and external enemies. The war declared on 20 April against Austria exposed internal opposition, as the “Brissotins” hoped, but it was neither limited nor brief. With the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, it was to prove one of the major turning points of the revolutionary period, influencing the internal history of France until Napoleon’s defeat in 1815. The French armies were initially in disarray because of the emigration of many noble officers and internal political dissension within garrisons. The vitriol of counterrevolutionary rhetoric added to the popular conviction that Louis was complicit in the defeats being suffered by the army. In response, the forty-eight neighborhood “sections” of Paris voted to form a Commune of Paris to organize insurrection and an army of twenty thousand *sans-culottes* from the newly democratized National Guard. After Louis took refuge in the nearby Legislative Assembly, six hundred Swiss guards, the palace’s main defenders, were killed in the fighting or subsequently in

bloody acts of retribution. This insurrection thereby succeeded in overthrowing the monarchy on 10 August 1792.

Among those who participated in the overthrow of the monarchy were soldiers from Marseille en route to the battlefield. They brought with them a song popular among republicans in the south—"La Marseillaise"—composed by the army officer Claude-Joseph Rouget de Lisle as the "Chant de guerre pour l'armée du Rhin" (War song of the Army of the Rhine). This song would later be adopted as the French national anthem.

The declaration of war and overthrow of the monarchy radicalized the Revolution. The political exclusion of "passive" citizens now called to defend the French nation was untenable. Moreover, by overthrowing the monarchy, the popular movement had issued the ultimate challenge to the whole of Europe. The Revolution was now armed, democratic, and republican.

On 2 September, news reached Paris that the great fortress at Verdun, just 250 kilometers (155 miles) from the capital, had fallen to the Prussians. The news generated an immediate, dramatic surge in popular fear and resolve. Convinced that "counterrevolutionaries" (whether nobles, priests, or common-law criminals) in prisons were waiting to break out and welcome the invaders once the volunteers had left for the front, hastily convened popular courts sentenced to death about 1,200 of the 2,700 prisoners brought before them, including 240 priests.

About two weeks after these "September massacres," revolutionary armies won their first great victory, at Valmy, 200 kilometers (125 miles) east of the capital. As news arrived of the victory, the new National Convention, elected by universal manhood suffrage, was convening in Paris. The men of the Convention were mostly middle class by social background. They were also democrats and republicans: immediately on convening, they abolished the monarchy and proclaimed France a republic.

The Jacobins within the Convention were somewhat closer to the popular movement, and exuded a militant republicanism. Their habit of sitting together on the upper-left-hand benches in the Convention earned them the epithet of the



An officer of the National Guard swears an oath of allegiance before the Altar of the Constitution and the Declaration of the Rights of Man. PRIVATE COLLECTION/BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY/LAUROS/GIRAUDON

"Mountain." The label given to their opposition, the "Girondins," denoted men closer in sympathy to the concern for political and economic stability among the upper bourgeoisie of Bordeaux, capital of the Gironde.

The trial of Louis XVI exposed this division. Whereas the Girondins sought to placate the rest of Europe by considering a sentence of exile or mercy, the thrust of the Jacobin argument during this dramatic and eloquent debate was that to spare Louis would be to admit his special nature: for them "Louis Capet" was a citizen guilty of treason. The Convention narrowly agreed, and Louis went to the guillotine on 21 January 1793. One effect of this regicide was the expansion of the enemy coalition to include Britain and Spain.

THE REVOLUTION IN THE BALANCE, 1793–1794

As the external military crisis worsened in early 1793, most of the uncommitted deputies swung behind the Jacobins' emergency proposals. The Convention ordered a levy of 300,000 conscripts in March. In the west this provoked massive armed rebellion and civil war, known, like the region itself, as "the Vendée." Ultimately, the civil war was to claim perhaps as many as 200,000 lives on each side, as many as the external wars waged from 1793 to 1794.

The nation was in grave danger of internal collapse and external defeat. In the spring of 1793 the Convention responded by vesting emergency executive powers in a Committee of Public Safety and placing policing powers in a Committee of General Security. The military challenge was met by an extraordinary mobilization of the nation's resources and repression of opponents. The Convention appointed "deputies on mission" from its own number to supervise the war effort. It passed emergency decrees, such as those declaring émigrés "civilly dead," and placed controls on grain and bread prices.

Despite these measures, by midsummer 1793 the Revolution faced its greatest crisis, which was simultaneously military, social, and political. Enemy troops were on French soil in the northeast, southeast, and southwest and, internally, the great revolt in the Vendée absorbed a major part of the republic's army. These threats were aggravated by the hostile response of sixty departmental administrations to the purge of twenty-one leading Girondins in June.

With the appointment of Robespierre in July and two other Jacobins in September, the Committee of Public Safety had the resolve to mobilize an entire society in defense of the Revolution and to decimate its internal and external opponents. Essential to this mobilization was the creation by the Jacobin government of a rural-urban alliance through a mixture of intimidation, force, and policies aimed both at meeting popular grievances and placing the entire country on a war footing. The Convention acted to meet sans-culotte demands by decreeing the "general maximum" of 29 September, which pegged the prices of thirty-nine commodities. It also responded to the waves

of rural unrest that had affected two-thirds of all departments since 1789, with the complete abolition of seigniorialism. From 17 July 1793, former seigneurs were left with only nonfeudal rents on land. The feudal regime was finally dead.

The central purpose of what became known as the Terror was to institute the emergency and draconian measures deemed necessary at a time of military crisis. The Convention acquiesced in draconian measures—such as surveillance committees in neighborhoods and villages, and suspension of civil liberties—necessary to secure the republic to a point where the newly drafted democratic constitution of June 1793 could be implemented. The Law of Suspects (17 September) was designed to imprison the unpatriotic with detention, to intimidate them into inaction, or to execute them as counterrevolutionaries. In the last three months of 1793, 177 of the 395 accused before a newly instituted extraordinary criminal court, the Revolutionary Tribunal, were sentenced to death, including the Girondin leaders and Marie-Antoinette. This mixture of national mobilization and intimidation was so successful that by the end of 1793 the threat of civil war and invasion had at least been countered.

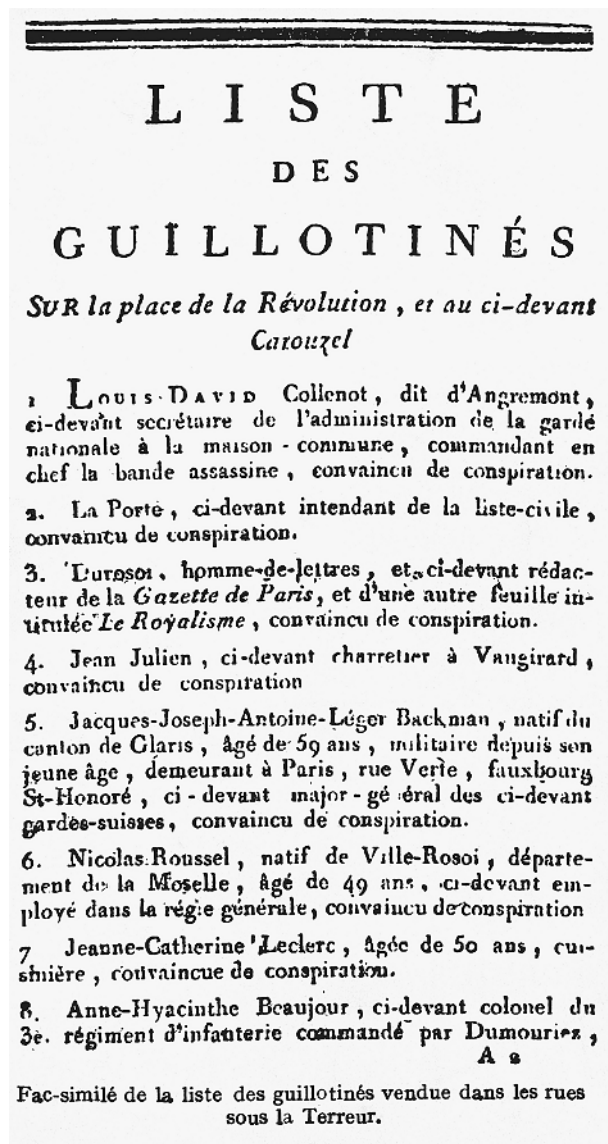
The Jacobins who now dominated the Convention and the Committee of Public Safety also sought to realize their vision of a regenerated society worthy of the grandeur of the Enlightenment and the Revolution. During the eighteen months after the overthrow of the monarchy in August 1792, a combination of radical Jacobin reforms and popular initiative created an extraordinary force for republican "regeneration." Supporters of the Revolution—"patriots," as they were most commonly known—marked their repudiation of the old world by attempting to eradicate all of its traces, giving children names drawn from nature, classical antiquity, or contemporary heroes, and purging place-names of religious or royal connotations. A new citizenry was to be created by a secular and republican education system. Most radically, in order to mark the magnitude of what had been achieved since the proclamation of the republic on 21 September 1792, the Convention introduced a new calendar that replaced the Gregorian calendar and its saints' days and religious cycles with a decimal calendar based on *décades*, periods of

ten days—three *décades* comprising a month. A year thus still consisted of twelve months, the names of which were drawn from nature, plus five *sans-culottes* days named after the virtues (with one extra holiday, Revolution Day, added in leap years). The calendar began on 22 September 1793: the first day of the Year II of liberty and equality.

In the eighteen months between August 1792 and early 1794, the political participation of urban working people reached its zenith. The *sans-culottes* had a vision of a society of small farms and workshops created by property redistribution and underpinned by free education, purges of old elites, and direct democracy.

The achievements of this new alliance of Jacobins, *sans-culottes*, and some of the peasantry were dramatic by the end of 1793. By then, republican forces led by a young artillery officer, Napoleon Bonaparte, had recaptured Toulon, and foreign armies had suffered major reverses in the northeast and southeast. The Vendéan rebellion had been contained and other revolts crushed, both at a huge cost in lives. Though the “general maximum” had not been fully implemented, the economic slide had been reversed, and the purchasing power of the assignat had climbed back to 48 percent from 36 percent a few months earlier.

For the majority of the Convention, however, the goal of the Terror was the attainment of peace, and economic and political controls were but temporary constraints to that end. The regular extension of the powers of the committees was a recognition of their achievements during the continuing war crisis, but it was not a measure of support for Jacobin ideology. In late 1793 “moderate” Jacobins such as Georges Danton and Camille Desmoulins urged an end to the controls of the Terror and the implementation of the constitution of 1793. For several months Robespierre and his closest Jacobin associates were able to paint Danton and his associates as “indulgents,” like the “Enragé” militants seen as guilty of undermining republican unity. Success in the war effort, especially the battle of Fleurus (26 June 1794)—which finally ended the threat of Austrian troops on French soil—exposed the divisions in the popular alliance of the Year II. The geographic incidence of executions during the Terror had been concentrated in departments where the military



A list of people to be guillotined at the Place de la Révolution in August 1792. The beheading of Louis David Collenot, whose name appears first on this list, represented the first use of the guillotine to execute a political prisoner. Such lists were sold in the streets of Paris. ©HULTON-DEUTSCH COLLECTION/CORBIS

threat had been greatest; but now, as the military threat receded, the number of executions for political opposition increased. Such executions included Danton and his associates, sent to the guillotine in April 1794.

A speech to the Convention by Robespierre on 26 July (8 Thermidor), with his vague threat to unnamed deputies, provided the motivation for reaction. Among those who plotted his overthrow

were Joseph Fouché, Jean-Marie Collot d'Herbois, Louis Fréron, and Paul Barras, fearful that Robespierre intended to call them to account for their bloody repression of revolts in Lyon, Toulon, and Marseille.

The execution of Robespierre and his associates on 28 July marked the end of a regime that had had the twin aims of saving the Revolution and creating a new society. It had achieved the former, at great cost, but the vision of the virtuous, self-abnegating civic warrior embodying the new society had palled for most within the Convention. The expression "the system of the Terror" was first used two days later by Bertrand Barère.

The year of the Terror has always polarized historians. To those sympathetic to the goals of the Revolution and mindful of the magnitude of the counterrevolution determined to crush it, it has seemed a successful emergency military regime during which excesses were regrettable but explicable. Others have emphasized the disproportionate level of violence against the Revolution's opponents, particularly as the military crisis receded. Still others have seen in the messianic social vision of the Jacobins a precursor to the most authoritarian regimes of the twentieth century. Whatever the case, the overthrow of Robespierre was universally welcomed at the time as symbolizing the end of large-scale executions.

ENDING THE REVOLUTION, 1794–1799

The post-Thermidorian regimes were republican, but they were driven above all else by the imperative to end the Revolution, most obviously by suppressing the sources of instability represented by the Jacobins and sans-culottes. The Thermidorians were hard men, many of them former Girondins, who had lived through the Terror in quiet opposition, and were determined that the terrifying experience would not be repeated. While there was a widespread longing for a return to democratic freedoms, a bitter social reaction was unleashed by the removal of wartime restrictions.

The end of all fixed prices in December 1794 unleashed rampant inflation, and, by April 1795, the general level of prices was about 750 percent above 1790 levels. In this context of social and

political reaction and economic deprivation, the sans-culottes made a final desperate attempt to regain the initiative. The risings of Germinal and Prairial Year III (April and May 1795) effectively sought a return to the promises of the autumn of 1793, the epitome of the sans-culottes' influence. The crushing of the May 1795 insurrection unleashed a wide-ranging reaction, with thousands of arrests. Prison camps were established in the Seychelles and French Guiana.

The majority in the Convention now sought a political settlement that would stabilize the Revolution and end popular upheaval. The Constitution of the Year III (August 1795) restricted participation in electoral assemblies by wealth, age, and education as well as by sex. Popular sovereignty was to be limited to the act of voting: petitions, political clubs, and even unarmed demonstrations were banned. The social rights promised in the Jacobin constitution of 1793 were removed; property ownership was again to be the basis of the social order and political power, as was the case from 1789 to 1792. Gone now was the optimism of the period 1789 to 1791, the belief that with the liberation of human creativity all could aspire to the "active" exercise of their capabilities. The constitution of 1795 now included a declaration of "duties," exhorting respect for the law, the family, and property. In this sense, the constitution can be seen to mark the end of the Revolution.

One important difference in the new constitution was the attempt to resolve religious divisions by separating church and state. On 11 Prairial Year III (30 May 1795) the regime allowed the reopening of churches closed during the Terror and allowed émigré priests to return under the decree of 7 Fructidor Year IV (24 August 1797), but only on condition of their taking a civic oath. Religious observance was to be a purely private matter: bells and outward signs of religiosity were forbidden. The church was to be sustained by the offerings of the faithful rather than direct state support.

By excluding the poor from active participation in the political process, the Directory sought to create a republican regime based on "capacity" and a stake in society. To avoid a strong executive with its Jacobin connotations, there were to be frequent partial elections to the Council of the Five

Hundred and rotation of executive authority. The rule of the committees was over. This combination of a narrow social base and internal instability caused the regime to vacillate between political alliances to the right and left to broaden its appeal and forced it to resort to draconian repression of opposition and to the use of military force.

For the better off, the regime of the Directory represented much of what they wanted: the guarantee of the major revolutionary achievements of the period 1789 to 1792 without threats from popular politics. The years of the Directory were often characterized, however, by bitter tensions occasioned by religious divisions, desertion from the army and avoidance of conscription, political abstention, and violent revenge for the deadly politics of the Year II. Underpinning all these tensions were the Directory's economic policies, which ultimately alienated the great mass of people.

As it trod its narrow path the Directory had to protect the regime against resurgent political forces on either side. The elections of 1797 returned a majority of royalists of various nuances. In response, the Directors annulled the elections of 177 deputies and called in troops on 17–18 Fructidor Year V (3–4 September 1797). A new wave of repression followed against refractory clergy, many of whom had returned in hope after the elections. Then, on 22 Floréal Year VI (11 May 1798) another coup was effected to prevent a resurgence of Jacobinism: this time 127 deputies were prevented from taking their seats.

The republican rationale for war in 1792—that this was a defensive war against tyrannical aggression that would naturally become a war of liberation joined by Europe's oppressed—had developed since 1794 into a war of territorial expansion. Peace treaties were signed with Prussia and Spain in 1795. In 1798 the Directory established “sister republics” in Switzerland and the Papal States; and the left bank of the Rhine was incorporated into the “natural boundaries” of what was increasingly referred to as “la grande nation.” Conflict with Britain and Austria continued. A peace treaty with the latter was signed at Campo-Formio on 25 Vendémiaire Year VI (17 October 1797), but hostilities recommenced in Italy in 1798. This, together with the extension of war with Britain into Ireland and Egypt, convinced the Directory

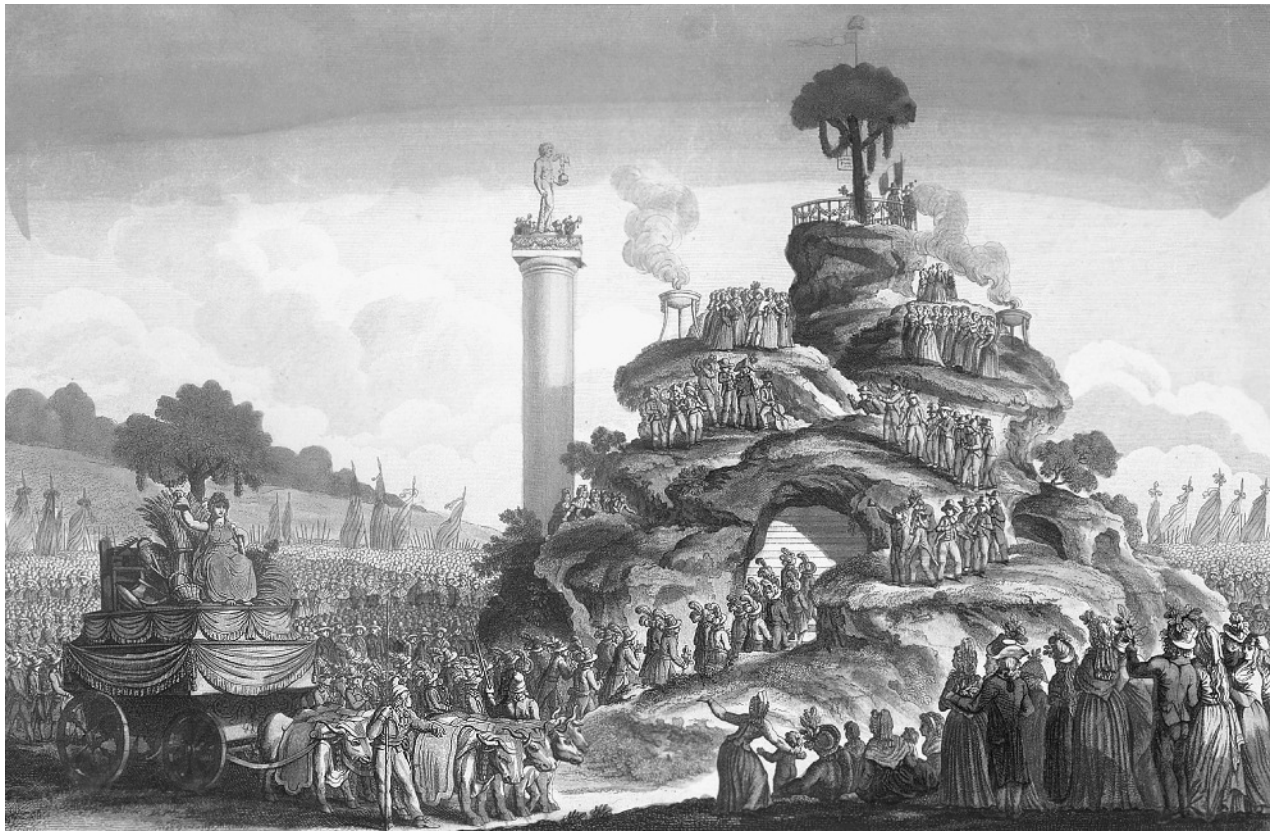
that irregular army levies had to be replaced by an annual conscription of single men aged twenty to twenty-five years (the Jourdan Law, 19 Fructidor Year VI [5 September 1798]).

The Directory's military ambitions were increasingly resented by rural populations liable to conscription and requisitioning at a time of economic difficulty. Resentments climaxed in the summer of 1799 in large-scale but uncoordinated royalist risings in the west and southwest. By that time, too, the requisitioning, anticlericalism, and repression practiced by French armies was provoking discontent and insurrection in all of the “sister republics.” This and the initial successes of the Second Coalition formed between Russia, Austria, and England provided a pretext for a challenge to the Directory, led by Napoleon, the army officer who had dispersed the royalist insurgents in 1795 and who now abandoned his shattered forces in Egypt. Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès and Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand, two of the architects of revolutionary change in the period from 1789 to 1791, supported Napoleon. On 18–19 Brumaire Year VIII (9–10 November 1799), the furious members of the Five Hundred were driven out by troops and a decade of parliamentary rule was over.

Napoleon moved quickly to establish internal and external peace. On 15 July 1801 a concordat was signed with the papacy, formally celebrated at Easter mass at Notre-Dame de Paris in 1802. The treaty of Lunéville was signed with Austria on 21 Pluviôse Year IX (9 February 1801) and that of Amiens with Britain on 5 Germinal Year X (25 March 1802). The end of war offered the chance for deserters to be amnestied and for returning émigrés and priests to be reintegrated into their communities in a climate of reconciliation. The peace with Europe was, of course, to be temporary.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE REVOLUTION

A revolution that had begun in 1789 with boundless hopes for a golden era of political liberty and social change had thus ended in 1799 with a military seizure of power. French people had had to endure a decade of political instability, civil war, and armed conflict with the rest of Europe. Despite this, the Revolution had permanently changed France, and these changes were to reverberate through Europe for decades to come.



View of the Elevated Mountain at the Champ de la Reunion for the Festival of the Supreme Being, 20 Prairial, Year 2 of the French Republic (8 June 1794). The Festival of the Supreme Being was instituted by French republicans to supplant traditional Catholic holidays. MUSÉE DE LA REVOLUTION FRANÇAISE, VIZILLE, FRANCE/BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY/VISUAL ARTS LIBRARY, LONDON, UK

Many of these changes were put in place from 1789 to 1791, when revolutionaries reshaped every aspect of institutional and public life according to principles of rationality, uniformity, and efficiency. The eighty-three departments (today ninety-six) were henceforth to be administered in precisely the same way; they were to have an identical structure of responsibilities, personnel, and powers. Diocesan boundaries coincided with departmental limits, and cathedrals were usually located in departmental capitals. The uniformity of administrative structures was reflected, too, in the innovation of a national system of weights, measures, and currency based on new, decimal measures. These evident benefits to business and commerce were accentuated by the abolition of tolls paid to towns and nobles and internal customs.

For the first time, the state was also understood as representing a more emotional entity, “the nation,” based on citizenship. All French citizens, whatever their social background and residence,

were to be judged according to a single uniform legal code and taxed by the same obligatory proportional taxes on wealth, especially landed property. This uniformity gave substance to the ideals of “fraternity” and “national unity,” meanings reinforced by the new political culture of citizenship and the celebration of new national heroes drawn from antiquity or the revolutionary struggle itself.

Historians agree that French political life had been fundamentally transformed. For the first time, a large and populous country had been reformed along democratic, republican lines. Even the Restoration of the monarchy in 1814 could not reverse the revolutionary change from royal absolutism to constitutional, representative government. But twenty-five years of political upheaval and division left a legacy of memories, both bitter and sweet. In the west, in particular, memories of the Terror and of mass conscription and war were etched deep into the memories of

every individual and community. The Revolution was a rich seedbed of ideologies ranging from communism and social democracy to liberal constitutionalism and authoritarian royalism, and French people were to remain divided about which political system was best able to reconcile authority, liberty, and equality.

Whatever the importance of these changes to government, political ideas, and memories, many of the essential characteristics of daily life emerged largely unchanged—especially patterns of work, the position of the poor, and social inequalities. In the colonies, too, the prerevolutionary hierarchies of race were reimposed, with one exception. In January 1802 French troops landed in Saint Domingue to reimpose colonial control; but after two years of bloody fighting the first postcolonial black nation—Haiti—was born. Elsewhere Napoleon reversed the Jacobin abolition of slavery in 1794 and in 1802 reintroduced the Code Noir of 1685, which treated slaves as the property of the slave owner. The slave trade would not be abolished until 1818, and slavery itself not until 1848.

Women emerged from the revolution with no political rights and limited legal rights, but one effect of the abolition of seignorialism may have been that rural women and their families were better nourished. In March 1790 the National Assembly abolished inheritance laws that had favored the first-born son in some regions. Although this was enacted more with a view to breaking the power of great noble patriarchs than to recognizing the rights of women, one outcome was the strengthening of the position of daughters. Another consequence of this legislation may have been a sudden drop in the national birthrate, from 39 per thousand in 1789 to 33 in 1804, as parents sought to limit family size and therefore pressures to subdivide the family's farm.

Despite the exhortations of revolutionary legislators to a peaceful, harmonious family life as the basis of the new political order, it is doubtful whether patterns of male violence changed. What did change, albeit temporarily, was the legal capacity of women to protect their rights within the household. The divorce law voted at the last session of the Legislative Assembly, on 20 September 1792, gave women remarkably broad grounds for leaving an unhappy marriage. Nationally, perhaps thirty thousand divorces were decreed under this

legislation, especially in towns, and it was working-women above all who used this law, which lasted until the enactment of the Napoleonic Code in 1804.

Perhaps 20 percent of land changed hands as a result of the expropriation of the church and émigrés, and much of this was acquired by better-off peasants. Indeed, peasants who owned their own land were among the most substantial beneficiaries of the Revolution. After the abolition of feudal dues and the church tithe, both of which had normally been paid in grain, farmers were in a better position to concentrate on using the land for its most productive purposes; they were also better fed. The gains for the peasantry went beyond tangible economic benefits. The abolition of seignorialism underpinned a revolutionary change in rural social relations, voiced in political behavior after 1789. Despite the emigration and death of many nobles, most noble families retained their properties intact, but nothing could compensate them for the loss of judicial rights and power—ranging from seignorial courts to the parlements—or the incalculable loss of prestige and deference caused by the practice of legal equality.

Those who had taken the initiative in creating the new France after 1789 had been the bourgeoisie, whether professional, administrative, commercial, landowning, or manufacturing. The Revolution created economic chaos for the commercial middle classes in the great coastal towns because of the uncertainties caused by wars and blockades and the temporary abolition of slavery. Many other bourgeois benefited from the new war industries, from a stronger internal market, and from uniform economic legislation. Everywhere, however, the Revolution had opened up political life for them and changed the dominant social values necessary to recognize their importance in the life of the nation. The Revolution was their triumph.

See also Citizenship; Committee of Public Safety; Danton, Georges-Jacques; Directory; Estates-General; France; French Revolutionary Wars and Napoleonic Wars; Girondins; Haiti; Jacobins; Lafayette, Marquis de; Louis XVI; Marat, Jean-Paul; Marie-Antoinette; Napoleon; Paris; Reign of Terror; Robespierre, Maximilien; Toussaint Louverture.

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