

The Revolution of August 10

By the spring of 1792, Austria seemed closer to war with France than ever before (Marie Antoinette was Austrian, the daughter of Maria Theresa). The Girondins were clamoring for war, ready to export the Revolution to the rest of Europe. The king finally agreed with the Girondins to declare war on Austria on April 20, 1792.

Louis XVI had his own private reasons for supporting military conflict with Austria. He hoped that the war would cause those opposed to the Revolution in France to support him and bring him back to his rightful position as monarch. In the Legislative Assembly, the Jacobins, led by Robespierre, did not favor war. Robespierre understood what the king was up to. The war issue caused a permanent split between the Girondins and the Jacobins.

Once under way, the war did not go well for the French. The French army was humiliated in the field, its generals retreating at the very sight of the enemy. (One French general was hanged by his own men because of his perceived cowardice.) The people of France blamed the losses on the Girondins, the supporters of the war.

When the Girondins passed a decree in the Legislative Assembly ordering the call up of 20,000 national guardsmen to protect the city of Paris, Louis XVI, using his limited powers under the new constitution, vetoed the decree. Soon, the Assembly was split between the Girondins and the Jacobins, with both sides blaming the other for the problems at hand.

In the streets, the Cordeliers, the common, working-class people, were fed up with the political infighting. By June, the workers of Paris—often called the *sans-culottes*, meaning “without knee breeches” since they wore long pants rather than the short pants and stockings worn by the nobility—were ready to take the Revolution into their own hands. On the 10th of June, 8000 *sans-culottes* of

Paris, carrying pikes, swords, and pitchforks, marched on the Tuileries palace with shouts of “Down with the veto!” Once inside, they manhandled the king, forcing him to speak in support of the Revolution. They even made him put on a red cap, the *sans-culotte* symbol of the revolution. But the king did not repeal his veto.



Despite street demonstrations by 20,000 Parisians protesting this rough treatment of the king, the *sans-culottes* were beginning to assert themselves into the mainstream of the Revolution. Many began calling for the deposing of the king. The *sans-culottes* began meeting together in political assemblies of their own throughout Paris. One group announced that the king must be removed by August 9 or they would begin a revolution

against the Revolution. Other *sans-culottes* joined with them. Together, they began meeting as a revolutionary municipal assembly, although they had no legal power to do so.

On the night of August 9, the revolutionary assembly took control of the Parisian government. Their supporters marched by the thousands to the Tuileries palace. The night was very warm and humid. Tempers were running at a fever pitch. Outside the palace, 4000 national guardsmen had been placed to defend the king. As the *sans-culotte* crowd grew, the guardsmen, sympathetic to them, turned their cannons around to face the king’s palace, forcing Louis and his family to flee through the gardens and take refuge in the Legislative Assembly. (The hall was nearly empty, as the delegates had fled in fear of the gathering mob, now numbering 20,000.) The *sans-culottes* then attacked the palace, killing hundreds of Swiss guardsmen, and setting the Tuileries on fire.

On August 10, the Legislative Assembly surrendered to the force of the new revolutionists, the Insurrectionary Commune, and voted to end the monarchy and depose Louis XVI. The darkest and bloodiest days of the revolution were yet ahead.

The Jacobins Take Control

After the assault on the Tuileries palace, so many of the ideals and gains of the French Revolution seemed lost. The monarchy was destroyed and the king reduced to nothing. The Legislative Assembly was meaningless, many of its members refusing to risk their lives by attending. The lawful city government—the Paris Commune—had been thrown out. Newspapers which had supported the monarchy were closed. Hundreds were killed during the insurrection of August 10.

The people of the streets of Paris gained control of events and determined the fate and the direction of the Revolution. With the destruction of the French monarchy, the new constitution was no longer valid. A second constitution needed to be written. Delegates to a National Convention were selected to decide on the new form of the French government. The election, although supposedly open to all male citizens, actually only involved a minority of Frenchmen. Many others were intimidated into not voting or refused to participate, disgusted at the violence and direction of the Revolution. As a result, only the most radical elements became members of the Convention, including many Jacobins and Girondins.

This phase of the Revolution is often called the Second French Revolution. It began with the dethroning of Louis XVI and it ended in bloody confusion and terror. The National Convention took up its meetings on September 21, 1792. There was pressing business. The war was ongoing with Austria, and now Prussia. And the fate of the former king awaited. Although Girondins wanted Louis to remain in prison, the Jacobins, led by the increasingly radical Robespierre, called for his execution on the grounds of treason. Papers discovered in November at the Tuileries palace indicated the king's guilt. The following month, Louis was brought before a Revolutionary tribunal. Once he was found guilty, the Jacobins, with support from the sans-culotte, ordered his execution.

On January 21, 1793, the former king of France, Louis XVI, climbed onto a scaffold before a large crowd of his former subjects. The king was to be executed by the guillotine. (The guillotine was just a few years old, having been proposed in 1789 as a

humane means of capital punishment.) He spoke to them, saying, "I die innocent." Once in position, the sharp blade of the guillotine dropped, severing his head. A guard picked it up and displayed it to the silent crowd. Cheers broke out: "Vive la nation! Vive la republique!"

Louis' death produced an angry response across Europe. When the National Convention offered support to any revolutionaries in neighboring countries, England, the Netherlands, and Spain joined Austria and Prussia in their war against France.

In February 1793, the National Convention responded with their own declarations of war. Serious defeats came in early spring. One important French general defected to the enemy. Since he had been known as a Girondin, his traitorous actions marked the doom of the Girondins at home. By June, Girondin leaders were arrested by a mob of several thousand sans-culottes and national guardsmen. This left the Jacobins in control. Now the leadership of the Revolution fell into the hands of Maximilien Robespierre, leader of the Jacobins.

Robespierre took command of the two-month-old Committee of Public Safety, which had been established in April as a war cabinet. The committee acted dictatorially and with harshness toward anyone suspected of disloyalty to the Revolution. A Reign of Terror developed, which brought the deaths of many French citizens, the guilty and the innocent alike. Blood began to flow through the streets of Paris.



"I die innocent!"

Review and Write

If you had lived in Paris during the French Revolution, would you have supported the Revolution? Why or why not? Give specific reasons.

The Reign of Terror

With the collapse of the Girondins, the Jacobins gained control of the Revolution. The leadership of the Jacobins included two men—the Parisian lawyer Maximilien Robespierre and Georges Danton, who had helped establish the Insurrectionary Commune.

Both men were middle-class lawyers. In appearance, they looked quite different from each other. Danton was heavy, of medium height, and tough. His nose was fairly flat from a bull attack at a young age. He had a booming voice and was very popular with the people of the streets. Robespierre was, by contrast, a small man with a thin face. His voice was high pitched and monotone. He wore a powdered wig, which was no longer the style of the day. He, too, was considered a friend of the common people, the sans-culottes.

Under Danton's leadership, the Committee of Public Safety had tried to negotiate an end to the war. As the crisis deepened, Danton was forced to resign from the Committee in July 1793. Robespierre became the new leader of the Committee. He now pursued the war with force and commitment.

Robespierre also instructed the National Convention to write a radical constitution. This new framework for the government included the vote for all adult males and made the government responsible for providing jobs, as well as a public education to all. But the Convention did not intend to enact this second constitution until the war was concluded, and counterrevolutionary rebellions, especially in the rural areas, were brought under control.

The Jacobins intended to hold onto their wartime powers and use them to their political advantage. A generalized campaign of terror followed. Watch committees, the Committee of Public Safety, and the court, known as the Revolutionary Tribunal, harassed and hunted down all those they felt were opposed to their revolutionary decisions. The

Girondins were persecuted. Royalists were killed by Revolutionary troops. The Convention passed an order called the Law of Suspects. This allowed the Revolutionary Tribunal to prosecute any they decided were opponents of the Revolution. Many people fell victim to the guillotine, including Marie Antoinette. In October of 1793, at the height of the Reign of Terror, the Revolutionary Tribunal found her guilty of treason, despite a lack of substantive evidence. She was executed on October 16.

The Revolutionary Tribunal cast its nets everywhere in search of “traitors” and “counterrevolutionaries.” The scaffold and the guillotine became the common symbol of the Revolution.

Throughout 1793 and much of 1794, the Revolutionary Tribunal carried on its work of terror with sickening regularity. In the mornings, the accused were given speedy trials and by afternoon, people gathered to hear the repeated and regular

dropping of the guillotines scattered about Paris. In all, approximately 40,000 people lost their lives during the Reign of Terror. However, less than half of them—about 16,000—were beheaded. Others were shot, drowned, and otherwise disposed of. Perhaps one of the greatest ironies of these massive executions is that, of those killed, approximately 70 percent were peasants and working-class citizens. Fewer than one in ten were nobility.

So many French citizens were killed that the Jacobins became divided themselves. By November of 1793, Danton was sickened by the executions and called for an end to the exterminations. Robespierre then turned on his co-leader and ordered him arrested as well. In April 1794, Danton was beheaded along with several other Jacobins. Robespierre had become the master of the Revolution with blood in his eye.



Maximilien Robespierre

The Fall of Robespierre

The guillotine became such a common sight in the streets of Paris, that many Parisians came to view it as a matter of fact. The beheading device was reproduced as jewelry for women. People bought each other gifts bearing pictures of guillotines. Parisian youngsters even played a gruesome game where they chopped off the heads of their dolls.

While the executions continued at the hands of the Jacobins, Robespierre continued to wage war both abroad and at home. The war with the powerful states of Europe was going better for the French by the end of 1793. French armies were actually able to take the offensive, invading neighboring countries. At home, the Reign of Terror continued in bloody fashion.

Against the backdrop of the guillotine, Robespierre busied himself trying to bring about drastic political and social change in France. Every aspect of life seemed open to change. Even Christianity came under attack. The Jacobins changed the calendar completely. Rather than remain tied to a calendar which measured time since Christ's birth, Robespierre began the new calendar on September 22, 1792, designating the next year as Year I. The months were renamed according to the seasons, and a week was no longer seven days, but ten instead. Part of his goal was to eliminate Sunday from the week, confounding Christian worship.

Language references changed. Rather than continue referring to men and women as "monsieur" and "madame," the leaders of the new Republic picked the terms "citizen" and "citizeness" to make everyone equal.

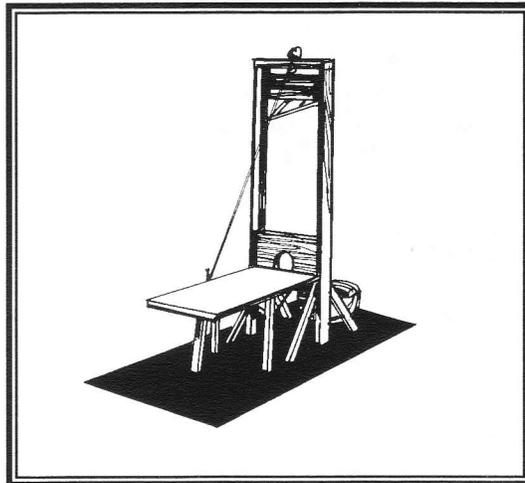
Clothing styles changed, as well. Red, white, and blue became the patriotic colors of true Revolutionaries. Old styles—sometimes seen as aristocratic—such as powdered wigs, ruffled shirts, elaborate skirts, and knee britches were abandoned and replaced with simpler styles of dress and hair.

In his drive to eliminate Christianity, Robespierre tried to create a new religion based on the ideas of the Enlightened Deists. He ordered churches and cathedrals closed to Christian worship and renamed them "Temples of Reason." By June of 1794, he sponsored a great festival called the Cult of the Supreme Being. Robespierre's goal was to make a religion which was not dependent on clergy, one in which everyone was free and equal.

The same month, Robespierre ordered the passage of a decree called the Law of 22 Prairial.

(Prairial was a new month name referring to June as the month of meadows.) Its goal was to define more activities as legally suspicious leading to more arrests until the prisons were overcrowded. Warehouses had to be used to house the spillover.

By July 1794, Robespierre and his campaign of paranoia and blood had reached its limit. Many considered him to be nothing more than a tyrant and blood-thirsty dictator. On July 27, he was arrested. The next day (after Robespierre attempted suicide by handgun) he was tried, condemned, and sent to the guillotine himself.



The guillotine, an efficient beheading apparatus, became the official instrument of execution in 1792 during the French Revolution

In pain from his gunshot wound to the chin, Robespierre screamed loudly as the blade dropped, ending his life and the nightmare of the Reign of Terror.

Almost immediately, change and calm were restored to France. Thousands of prisoners were released. The Law of Suspects was done away with. The Committee of Public Safety was reduced in power. And the National Convention created a new constitution by 1795.

The new government was a poor one called the Directory. It consisted of five directors who shared power. Never effective and often corrupt, the Directory was not popular with the people.

By 1797, the French military gained control of the government. Two years later, a general named Napoleon Bonaparte came to power.