

THE
CONNELL GUIDE
TO



THE FRENCH
REVOLUTION

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every school in the country.”

JULIAN FELLOWES

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW
IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

by David Andress

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A rough outline

1763

In 1763, France lost most of its overseas territory as part of the disastrous end of the **Seven Years' War**.^{*} With the state's debts hugely increased by military costs, government ministers spent the next 15 years struggling to impose new taxes on the privileged social elite, and generally failing. Participation in the **American War of Independence** was even more costly, and by the late 1780s the need for structural reform of state finances had become critical.

1787-8

In 1787, finance minister Charles Alexandre de Calonne brought together an Assembly of Notables – 144 leading noble figures – to try to win agreement for new taxes and other changes. They rejected his case. A year of institutional struggles followed, and in the second half of 1788 the crown had to agree to summon an Estates-General, France's medieval “parliament”, which had not met since 1614.

The Estates-General was an elected body, and

^{*} All highlighted words and phrases are explained in the glossary on p.125

during the elections cahiers de doléances, or registers of grievance, were drawn up by every village and town. These revealed an enormous appetite for changing not just the tax system but the structure of social privileges that gave the elite much of its power, and for making representative institutions permanent.

1789

When the Estates-General met at Versailles in May 1789, the conflict between the commoners of the “Third Estate” and the noble “Second Estate” became the key issue: in June the Third Estate struck out, renaming itself the “National Assembly” and proclaiming it would give France a new constitution.

In July the royal court decided this defiance was too much. But when it tried to isolate and gain control of the Assembly, Paris erupted with popular resistance. Fearing a military attack on the city, tens of thousands armed themselves, and on 14 July stormed the fortress of the Bastille in the east of the city to secure its huge stock of gunpowder.

Louis XVI was forced to make peace with the Assembly. For a few weeks, a spirit of unity prevailed, and, spurred by news of widespread rural unrest, the Assembly agreed on 4 August to abolish many categories of social and taxation privileges, creating a united body of citizens. Later in the

month they sought to enshrine their principles by drafting the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen*.

Over the next two years, the Assembly gradually wrote a new charter for the “constitutional monarchy” they were creating. Meanwhile, dissenting nobles formed increasingly violent plans for resistance, often in alliance with the *émigrés* – opponents of reform who had emigrated across the frontiers of France.

1790

The end of privilege turned out to be complicated: many peasants felt it did not leave them any better off. The faithful were troubled by changes to the Catholic Church. The state had confiscated the Church’s massive property holdings as security for its debts, and now sought to liquidate some of these assets. Violent resistance became common.

Meanwhile, revolutionary politics was developing its own language and practices, from an explosive growth in a free press, to the formation of political clubs. Demands to act against the “aristocratic” and “counter-revolutionary” threat became increasingly radical. Democratic elections for every post from village mayor to district judge entrenched a new bottom-up culture of politics.

1791

Louis XVI seemed to have accepted the Revolution, but the truth was shockingly revealed in June 1791 when he tried to escape from Paris to the frontiers with his family. Recaptured at Varennes, he agreed with the Assembly’s leadership to pretend he had been taken from the capital against his will – because they could not imagine how to secure the country’s future without a monarch.

In the autumn, new elections produced a new Legislative Assembly, staffed by men largely drawn from the new patriotic culture of the revolution. Radical “**Brissotin**” leaders (so-called after Jacques-Pierre Brissot) quickly emerged, concentrating their efforts on the continuing threat of the *émigrés* (now including both of the king’s brothers), and promoting war against the powers that sheltered them – particularly Austria. Soon more conservative revolutionary leaders joined this aggressive patriotic militarism, seeing war as a path to national unity.

1792

The royal family also came out in favour of war, but plotted secretly to profit from defeat by recalling the French to subordination. Only a few ultra-radicals, notably Maximilien Robespierre, recognised this as dangerous possibility, and in April 1792, war was

declared on Austria, and shortly afterwards on Prussia.

War was disastrous. A wave of defeats was followed by the real threat of invasion. The Brissotin leadership was trapped between a rising wave of patriotic republicanism and their belief that to overthrow the monarchy would bring chaotic and total defeat.

Strong radical forces rallied in Paris, and on 10th August 1792 forced the king to step down. Republican political forces then purged local government, arrested “suspect” nobles and priests, and co-ordinated elections for a “National Convention” to write a new constitution.

Meanwhile, enemy forces approached, capturing Verdun, the last fortified point before Paris, at the start of September. Radicals in Paris feared a counter-revolutionary uprising in the overcrowded prisons and between 2nd and 5th September killed more than 1,000 inmates.

The Brissotins (now often called “Girondins”) and the more radical “**Montagnards**” confronted each other in the new Convention in the shadow of this massacre, each seeing the other as a dangerous threat. French armies, meanwhile, saved Paris from attack with a victory against the Prussians at Valmy on 20th September.

1793

Until the end of 1792, the Convention was divided over the fate of the king. In January 1793, after a lengthy trial, he was found guilty unanimously, but condemned to death by only a narrow majority. He was executed by guillotine on 21st January.

The spring of 1793 was marked by an expansion of the war. Britain, Spain and the Italian states were drawn in. France was committed to fighting not only on all its land frontiers but also on the high seas and in its remaining colonies. As part of the war effort, local quotas for conscription were imposed, surveillance committees were established to watch for traitors, and a Revolutionary Tribunal was created to judge political crimes. Thus the mechanisms of “the Terror” began to take shape.

While doing all this, the Convention also tore itself apart. Girondins and Montagnards, the latter supported by so-called “sans-culotte” ultra-radicals, denounced each other, sometimes even coming to blows. In this context, further betrayal erupted: in the north-west, there were massive insurrections against conscription. In the Vendée region these coalesced into a “Royal and Catholic” army of rebels.

In late May 1793, Parisian sans-culotte leaders purged the Convention, mobilising massive forces

to intimidate it into expelling around two dozen Girondins. At almost the same moment, Girondin sympathisers in Lyon and Marseille rebelled against aggressive Montagnard emissaries and their local agents. Within weeks, a civil war between these two forces overlay all the other conflicts already threatening to tear France apart.

The Convention's **Committee of Public Safety**, charged with overseeing the government, was reorganised in July 1793. Robespierre joined it to campaign for patriotic unity and sacrifice, building on his reputation for incorruptibility. Meanwhile, despite celebrating the completion of a new democratic constitution with a festival on 10th August, the Convention declined to call new elections, claiming the conditions were too dangerous.

In Paris, the Montagnard-dominated Convention faced pressure from the sans-culotte movement that claimed to represent the common people, starving thanks to “counter-revolutionary” hoarding. This pressure helped to produce new laws: the levée en masse (a Mass Levy committing the whole population to the war effort); the Law of Suspects, ultimately placing tens of thousands in detention; and the General Maximum, a system of price controls that spread a new bureaucracy across the country. New “revolutionary armies” formed of sans-culotte militants were recruited, not to fight on the frontiers, but to hunt down hoarders.

The autumn of 1793 saw the internal military situation come under control – both Vendée rebels and pro-Girondin forces were crushed – while combat on the frontiers was at least stabilised. In Paris, the Girondin leadership, Marie-Antoinette, and a series of other notable figures were given show trials at the Revolutionary Tribunal and sent to the guillotine.

These months also saw the first serious divisions amongst the Montagnards. While some advocated a “de-Christianising” attack on all faith as part of an uncompromising approach, others argued for a relaxation of attacks on internal treachery, and pursuit of negotiated peace. There were rumours, and some evidence, of real corruption in both camps. By the end of the year, a new wave of official purging of all public offices was decreed, spreading further fear and division.

1794

During the winter of 1793/94, the practical measures of mobilisation put in place enabled the successful raising, arming and training of massive new armies, approaching a million men, and in the spring these began successful offensive action on all fronts.

At the same time, the politics of the Terror began to consume the Montagnard leadership. Real evidence of corruption mingled with rumours and

fabrications. The sans-culotte leadership was purged first in March 1794, shutting down independent radical politics in the capital; then the peace faction was denounced, tried, and executed, all in the space of a few days.

Robespierre was only one of those involved in these decisions, but he came to be seen as the leader of the intensifying political cannibalism. By the early summer, as the Convention pressed on with grand plans for the cultural regeneration of the Republic, it was also approving new, faster trials and mass-executions.

With success on the battle-front, the pressure to purge seemed increasingly detached from reality, more like a “Robespierrist” plot to seize power. On 9 **Thermidor** (or 27th July), all the many Montagnards Robespierre was threatening in the Convention rallied to send him, four other Convention members, and about 100 of their supporters, to the guillotine.¹

After Thermidor the Convention continued in office for another 15 months. While some had seen Robespierre’s fall as a chance to “save” radical republicanism, it soon became clear that a relaxation of terror had let more conservative forces back into politics. The political pendulum swung

Opposite: Portrait of Maximilien Robespierre (1758-1794)



against the more radical and sans-culotte “terrorists” and there were soon new trials and purges.

In the autumn of 1794, the General Maximum was abandoned, allowing food prices to rise. A very harsh winter followed, with widespread shortage and real starvation.

1795

In the spring of 1795, sans-culotte forces in Paris tried to rise against the Convention, demanding material aid and the enacting of the 1793 democratic constitution. They managed to seize control of the chamber for a few hours before being crushed, their actions adding to demands for rigorous repression of “terrorist” groups.

The military situation had been turned around: from successful national defence in 1794, France went on in 1795 to occupy the Netherlands, secure favourable peace terms from Prussia and Spain (turning the latter into an ally the next year), and in 1796 attacked Austrian power in Italy. Overseas colonies had fallen to Britain, with its strong navy, but within Europe there was now the potential for French military domination.

In late August 1795 the Convention published the “Constitution of the Year III”, introducing annual elections, a bicameral legislature and a five-man collective “head of state” – the Directory. The “Law of Two-Thirds” required that two-thirds of those who first took national office in the new legislature were members of the old Convention. A structural balancing act was accompanied by a political one: potentially radical clubs and popular societies were banned, and when in October royalists launched violent protests in Paris, they were crushed and further repressive laws introduced.

1796-7

Throughout 1796, as General Bonaparte’s army rampaged through northern Italy, the Directory tried to rule in a centrist manner, still facing violent threats from both radicals and royalists. Peace with Austria in 1797 left France dominant in northern and central Italy, and turning its attention to the possibility of an invasion of Britain.

Elections in the spring of 1797 saw the old Convention members ousted en masse from the legislature, with a strong swing to the right amongst electors. The political crisis this threatened was met in September with a purge led by the Directory and the army, and an apparent swing to the left in national policy. But when in the spring of 1798 the electorate responded by choosing more radical

candidates, they too were purged, as an “extreme centre” of republican leadership treated their control over the state as more important than voters’ wishes.

The French economy was suffering from rampant inflation. Paper money printing and the loot of military campaigns were the state’s only resources. Tax-collection and many other aspects of civil existence were non-functional, as echoes of the Terror continued to drive factional conflict at the local level.

1798-9

Military expansionism reached a peak in the summer of 1798. Bonaparte’s expedition to Egypt first seized Malta, then smashed Turkish power along the Nile. At the same time there was a short-lived but real possibility of a French army linking up with insurrection in Ireland. However, British naval victory at Aboukir Bay in August cut Bonaparte off from reinforcement, and at the end of the year the Kingdom of Naples joined Britain and Russia against France, threatening the Republic’s Italian position.

In the spring of 1799, French aggression pushed Austria into the enemy alliance. Allied forces, accompanied by popular pro-Catholic risings, drove the French out of almost all their Italian territories.

Internally, elections were closely monitored, but still produced a legislature at odds with the Directory, while in the summer open royalist insurrections broke out. The Directory itself was forcibly purged under pressure from the legislature in June, and an atmosphere of pervasive crisis endured thereafter.

General Bonaparte, abandoning his army in Egypt, reached France in October, and became the figurehead of an existing group of authoritarian centrist conspirators; in less than a month the conspiracy acted, and in a *coup d’état* the Directorial constitution was overthrown in favour of a “Consulate” – a supposedly collective form of government that Bonaparte rapidly came to dominate.

Why has the French Revolution caused so much argument?

There has never been, and probably never will be, agreement on how to understand the French Revolution. It divided not only France, but all of Europe, as soon as it began. In Britain it was first greeted as France “catching up” with the kind of parliamentary institutions they had had in place for a century, but within a year a much more divisive debate opened up.

Edmund Burke, an MP and prominent member of the Whig party, who had supported American independence, saw in France something infinitely more dangerous. His *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) painted a picture of a society tearing itself apart from within, as ignorant mobs and abstract political speculators formed an unholy alliance to destroy time-honoured social structures.

His former friend Thomas Paine, who had been an even more active supporter of the American cause, answered him the following year with the *Rights of Man*, a blistering attack on the idea that past generations could dictate political arrangements to the future. He called for Britons to join the Franco-American tide of change. Their debate split society. Working men formed

“Corresponding Societies” to debate reform. The response was a decade of intensifying repression – to the extent that Britain might be said to have experienced all the evils of a counter-revolution without ever having a revolution.

While the French example was causing havoc in Britain, observers across Europe were debating the causes of the strife. Accustomed to seeing “great men” as the driving force of politics in an aristocratic society, many insisted that there had to be a leading will behind the Revolution. The abbé Barruel produced a *History of Jacobinism* in 1797 which treated the events of the 1790s as the outcome of a conspiracy of anti-Catholic forces: the leading thinkers of the **Enlightenment**, **Freemasonry** and the (largely imaginary) Illuminati all forming the foundations of the “Jacobin” spirit of the radical revolutionaries.

The notion of leaders with hidden motivations allied to a corruptible mob echoed down the following century – in Charles Dickens’s *Tale of Two Cities*, for example, and in the work of the French historian Hippolyte Taine, who gave immensely detailed (and largely false) accounts of the way popular violence had been whipped up by corrupting gold.

The European left had learned very different lessons from the Revolution. Starting with a generation of radical liberal historians in the 1820s and 30s, it was interpreted as a structural

change in society that allowed the capitalist “bourgeoisie” to achieve a political freedom to match its economic power. More socially radical historians also promoted the notion that “the people” had shown their distinctive spirit in the 1790s, in rising up to defend their rights, and the nation’s freedom.

These ideas came together as part of the foundations of socialist political thought. Karl Marx explicitly developed the idea that revolutionary change was a necessary part of historical development. As Marxism, and later Communism, became globally powerful ideologies in the early to mid-20th centuries, the idea that the French Revolution was a significant stage in social evolution became dominant in Western understandings of it.

The fall of Communism from 1989, and the rise of more self-consciously anti-communist thought in the West which had already marked the 1970s and 1980s, shifted the historical field. Without quite reaching back to the conspiracy-mongering of Barruel, the French historian François Furet in the 1970s pinned the revolutionary trauma on “societies of thought” – educated men with agendas. For Furet, the central experience and lesson of the Revolution was of the dangerous power of ideology to run amok, creating its own “reality” in which the actual rights and lives of individuals were devalued.

While such authors put forward essentially academic arguments against the prevailing consensus of the Revolution as a historical necessity, Simon Schama produced *Citizens*, a best-selling narrative for a wider audience that held up the Terror as something truly terrible, and as the outcome of a Revolution inflicted on a society that had been flourishing. It was driven by forces that, in his version, looked and sounded very much like the villains Edmund Burke had promoted 200 years earlier: bloodthirsty mobs and callous, manipulative leaders.²

Schama’s work is a particularly vivid illustration of the fact that histories of the French Revolution are all written in political contexts, and carry political messages: in his case, that revolutionary change is always a bad thing, led by bad people. Few recent academic interpretations have been that bald, although they continue to cover a wide political spectrum.

In many respects, the more we have unearthed about the detailed history of events from 1789 and after, the more scope has been created for people to draw their own conclusions about which aspects of the evolving situation were the really important ones, and why. We now have to hand, for example, intimate records of the life of the royal family, and equally intimate accounts of the hopes and fears of groups and individuals everywhere from the aristocracy and mercantile classes to the sans-

culottes of Paris and the provincial peasantry. Archival records have been mined to show us how every section of society thought – and, not least, have drawn attention to the haze of fear and confusion that hung over everything they did. Every succeeding generation has had to make up their own minds about the French Revolution. There is no sign of that ceasing to be true any time soon.

Pre-Revolution

What caused the French Revolution?

The debate between radical and conservative views of revolution is often a debate about structures and intentions. Was collapse built into the evils of a cruelly hierarchical society, or was a functioning and developing society plunged into chaos by opportunists exploiting a temporary setback? In that sense, the debate has classically been one between *social* and *political* interpretations, although it is also one about long and short term causes, and, more recently, about how much cultural issues need to be considered.

Within the sphere of the social, the key question since the 1820s has been the rise of the middle class. Since this class, and its attendant capitalist

values, clearly triumphed in the 19th century, it was generally taken for granted by scholars that it had played a decisive role in events. Revisionist studies in the 1960s and 1970s, however, queried this, showing that the link between the kind of people who took leading roles in the Revolution and any kind of “capitalist” values was weak. Career paths, even for merchants, tended to end with buying land and titles and aspiring to become noble. Colin Lucas famously called the bourgeoisie in this system a “transitional category of indeterminate social mutants”, with no clear collective difference in goals from the established elite.³

But while a simple link between class structure, economic change and revolution was broken by the work of Lucas, among others, more recent scholarship has shown that capitalist values were without doubt intruding more and more into French society. Colin Jones argues that a flourishing provincial press in the late 18th century promoted a consumer culture, disseminating commercial information and providing a marketplace for all kinds of transactions. Lauren Clay documents an ardently pro-capitalist culture amongst regional and nationwide networks of merchants, while also showing how the swelling trade with Caribbean slave colonies was transforming the economy.⁴

One important way of understanding these apparent contradictions comes through Timothy