



The Radicalisation of the Revolution, 1791-93

This is a transcript of the [Radicalisation of the Revolution, 1791-93](https://www.mrallsophistory.com/podcast/radicalisation-of-the-revolution-1791-93) podcast from www.mrallsophistory.com

By the summer of 1791, King Louis XVI's already fragile reputation was in pieces. In the last podcast we saw how he had refused to approve both the August Decrees and the Declaration of the Rights of Man until forced to during the October Days. To make matters worse, after moving to the Tuileries palace in Paris he fled for the Austrian border in June 1791.

The flight and subsequent capture of the royal family had raised further questions about the possibility of working with the King. The problem was that the government was divided over what to do. While the moderates still hoped to salvage a constitutional monarchy, an increasing number of radicals demanded that the king be stripped of his crown and put on trial for treason. More fuel was added to the fire when, in August 1791, the Emperor Leopold II of Austria – Marie Antoinette's brother – issued the Declaration of Pillnitz in which he called on all European monarchs to stand up against the French revolution. The fact that the queen's brother was calling for assistance to end the revolution was highly inflammatory.

Meanwhile, the Constituent Assembly was finishing its work on the constitution which was finally ready in September 1791. It maintained a hereditary monarchy, but placed numerous limits on the extent of the monarch's power. In particular it placed responsibility for the declaration of war in the hands of the assembly.

The assembly that was to make new laws under the terms of the new constitution was known as the Legislative Assembly. It consisted almost entirely of the bourgeoisie, but had deputies from right across the political spectrum. When the Legislative Assembly first met on 1st October 1791, they began by discussing what action to take against the refractory priests and the emigres. Refractory priests were declared enemies of the revolution, and lost their income. Emigres who did not return to France by 1st January 1792 would have their property confiscated and be declared traitors of the nation. Such radical laws met with opposition from the King, who vetoed them in November. It was becoming more and more clear that the assembly and the King were on a collision course over control of the nation.

As these internal tensions mounted, war clouds gathered. Louis went along with the calls for action as he hoped to use war to consolidate his own position. Meanwhile, inside the assembly, a sizeable group of deputies hoped that war would expose those people within France who were a threat to the revolution. Eventually, on 20th April 1792, the National Assembly declared war on Austria.



Having lost a number of generals after the revolution due to their noble status, the French army was badly organised and ill prepared for war. Early defeats led to the French border being left undefended within a month, and further divided the already fractured French nation. With many believing that counter-revolutionaries at home were sabotaging the war effort, the pro-war ministers in the government tried to take action against the perceived traitors but the King, again, vetoed their laws.

In response, a group of 8000 radical protesters – who rallied under the name the Sans Culottes – demanded that Louis reverse his decision after they stormed the Tuileries palace. Louis held his nerve after being forced to drink to the health of the nation, but the animosity between the radicals and the monarchy was clear. Tensions grew when the German princes issued the Brunswick Manifesto on 1st August 1792, in which they announced their intentions to restore Louis XVI. To the revolutionaries this proved that the King was a traitor. If France's enemies wanted the King to be restored, the King himself must be an enemy. With 20,000 National Guards from the provinces protecting Paris, and the assembly declaring the fatherland in danger, it was clear that the revolution was about to take a more radical direction.

The experiment of a constitutional monarchy ended on 9th August. After seizing power of the Hotel de Ville and setting up a revolutionary commune, a group of Sans Culottes and their supporters marched on the Tuileries palace to capture the King. He had fled to the nearby assembly and so, after a short but bloody battle with the King's guards, the radicals stormed the chamber. Forced to give in to the radicals' demands, the assembly suspended the King's authority and imprisoned him in the Temple. What they should do with the King, however, was yet to be decided.

The King's fate was to be settled by a new assembly – the National Convention – that was to be elected on a franchise of universal male suffrage. While plans were put in place for the election, the situation in France grew steadily worse. The French army continued to suffer devastating defeats, and Austrian and Prussian forces crossed the border and got closer to Paris. Paranoia grew in the capital as more and more counter-revolutionaries were thrown in Parisian jails. Afraid that the prisoners would mount an uprising and hand Paris to the invaders, Jean-Paul Marat, one of the most radical of all the revolutionary leaders, demanded that they all be killed. The September Massacres saw the deaths of at least 1,500 inmates at the hands of the Sans Culottes mob in just the first 5 days, although the killing didn't stop until news of a Prussian defeat that halted the advance on Paris reached the capital. This French victory heralded a turnaround for the army, and came just as the newly-elected National Convention opened for the first time.



The National Convention consisted of 782 deputies from across France. Sitting high up on the left of the meeting hall were the Jacobins and their militant radical supporters, who gained the nickname the Montagnards. On the right of the hall were Girondins and, in the middle, a group of generally moderate deputies who became known as the Plain. Predominantly bourgeois in nature, they all shared a republican outlook but differed on how they should achieve it. For example, while the Jacobins wanted to centralise all power in Paris, the Girondins preferred to decentralise power to the provinces. But such specifics could wait. The first thing that needed to be settled was the fate of the king and, on September 21, 1792, the monarchy was abolished and France proclaimed a republic. This new era was heralded with the creation of a new calendar, in place of the old Christian calendar, and started with the proclamation of the republic.

But, despite the new calendar, time was ticking on. The King stayed imprisoned in the Temple while the deputies argued about his fate. Continued French success in war meant that the Convention had plenty of time for debate. The militant radicals from the Jacobins and the Montagnards argued in favour of trial and execution, whereas the Girondins were more cautious. Although supportive of a trial, they were reluctant to commit regicide – to kill the king. But as they argued, new evidence against Louis XVI was discovered. A number of papers that proved he had been in contact with France's enemies was evidence of treason, and on 10th December 1792 the King's trial opened. While a guilty verdict a foregone conclusion, especially after Marat insisted that each deputy should announce their decision publicly, the punishment was not. 693 of the 721 deputies found Louis guilty, but a much closer vote of 361 in favour of the death penalty against 319 who preferred life imprisonment.

The close result in the death penalty vote demonstrated the bitter division that had emerged amongst the revolutionaries. However close the vote proved to be, though, the death penalty secured both the end of the monarchy and the dominance of the radical Montagnards in the Convention. The King was beheaded by guillotine on 21st January 1793, but much more blood was about to be spilled in what became known as The Terror.