



The Reign of Terror

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We've previously seen how the so-called 'Second Revolution' of 1792 ushered in a new, more radical, phase. The key driving force were the Jacobins, supported on the streets by the sans-culottes. This term was first used in 1792 to describe the Parisian workers who played a prominent part in the revolution. Contrary to popular myth, the majority of sans-culottes were actually skilled workers – craftsmen, tradesmen, and even some businessmen. Their key grievance was due to the bad state of the economy such as rising inflation and shortages of food. The fact that the sans-culottes were a united force in the capital had inevitably put some pressure on the government, and had begun to dictate events. The sans-culottes had already shown their influence through the March to Versailles, the Champs de Mars, and the attack on Tuileries but the sheer level of power that they wielded was best demonstrated in the September Massacres.

By the end of January 1793, with the king beheaded, the sans-culottes forged an even closer relationship with Robespierre and the Jacobin Montagnards who it is believed may have manipulated the sans-culottes for their own ends. Certainly it's clear that the power of the sans-culottes quickly declined after the fall of Robespierre in the Thermidorian Reaction. But I'm getting ahead of myself. In order to understand the Reign of Terror and the fall of Robespierre we must first consider the events that forced such radicalism.

By the end of 1792 it appeared to most people in France that the war was beginning to turn in their favour. However, the start of 1793 saw the renewed vigour of the counter-revolutionary armies and invasion was, once again, a very real threat. March 1793 saw Britain form the First Coalition – a united force of foreign powers determined to confront the revolution. This external threat to France coincided with internal pressures. In order to pay for the war, the Convention simply printed more assignats. This caused them to fall in value, and led to farmers hoarding their crops rather than sell their grain in return for the worthless paper money. Peasant discontent with the subsequent soaring bread prices and increased land taxes led to an uprising in the Vendée region in particular. Furthermore the formation of royal Catholic army in May 1793 led to the fall of Lyon, Marseilles and Toulon to counter-revolutionary forces. In the face of such enormous pressures the Convention was forced to bring the army under its direct control and to divert up to 30,000 troops from the war to suppress the internal problems.

Due to the counter-revolution in the provinces, the Convention also took the decision to centralise control of France in Paris. This saw the creation of several committees, most notably the Committee for General Security and the infamous Committee for Public Safety that wielded executive power over the Convention. The Girondins deputies had tried to limit the amount of control exercised by Paris but, being based in Paris themselves, found



themselves subject to the will of the Parisian mob. Anti-Gironde sentiment overflowed on the 2nd June when the sans-culottes and 80,000 National Guards converged on the Convention to demand the expulsion of the Girondins. Throughout the rest of France suspected royalists were attacked and arrested but, on the other side, on the 13th July the prominent radical Marat was murdered by Charlotte Corday, a Gironde, while he bathed.

By the summer of 1793, therefore, internal forces were ripping France apart while the army struggled to fight off the foreign coalition. By now the Convention was dominated by the radical Jacobins whose main aims were to win the war, suppress the enemies of the revolution at home, and establish what Robespierre and some other leaders called the 'republic of virtue'.

Their first significant move was to introduce the Levée en masse, a form of military draft, in August 1793 in an attempt to unite France for total war. They argued that French soldiers and French civilians needed to fight together for the future of the French nation, although the move still met with significant opposition in the areas of France sympathetic to the monarchy. Considerable anti-Jacobean sentiment continued to be felt in the provinces but, despite this federalist revolt, the reinvigorated revolutionary armies successfully began to inflict a series of military defeats on the coalition partners. Meanwhile the Jacobins pushed on with more and more extreme measures in an attempt to bring France under control. Thus under pressure from its own deputies, and a group of sans-culottes who surrounded the building in an attempt to force their will, on September 5th 1793 the Convention – in the words of Robespierre – made Terror “the order of the day”.

The historian D G Wright highlights the significance of this decision. Terror and harsh criminal sentences had now become, in his words, “a deliberate policy of government”. The search for rebels began swiftly and saw huge numbers of alleged counter-revolutionaries brought before local revolutionary tribunals. Beginning with a series of show trials in October that led to the executions of significant anti-revolutionaries such as Marie Antoinette, the enemies of the nation were rounded up and sent to the guillotine – nicknamed with black humour ‘the national razor’ – in their thousands.

It's important to note that no accurate figures exist for the total number of people executed and that, of those killed, not all of them met their fate on the guillotine. While 17,000 'official' executions have been identified, there were undoubtedly many more that were not recorded. Furthermore there were other executions such as those of 800 rebels in Toulon who were killed by firing squad. In total, estimates place the number of victims of the Terror at around 2,000 in Paris and perhaps as many as 50,000 throughout the rest of France. Remember that while some areas suffered terribly in the Terror, others were barely affected.

While the period of the Terror is most notable for these large-scale acts of punishment, in other areas of French life dramatic reforms were being pushed through. Economic measures



had been introduced that confiscated church and aristocratic land and controlled wages and prices use the Law of the Maximum. A new egalitarian dress code was introduced, a new calendar enforced, and even a new religion was established as part of the dechristianisation campaign that was known as the Cult of the Supreme Being.

Although ruthless, it's hard to deny that the Terror succeeded in its aims. Foreign invasion and civil war had created a national emergency that many at the time believed could only be overcome through extreme measures. The Levée en masse, despite protests in some areas, created a broader sense of national unity and purpose which helped to turn the war in the Republic's favour. Meanwhile the revolutionary tribunals removed counter-revolutionary threats, or at least silenced through fear those who might otherwise speak out against the government. Furthermore the economic reforms successfully brought inflation under control and won the support of the poor who could now afford to eat. Despite the improved domestic situation, however, the Terror was not immediately relaxed. If anything, the situation became even more extreme.

At the helm of this most radical phase of the revolution was Maximillian Robespierre, a qualified lawyer and talented public speaker. By 1791 he had successfully gained control of the Jacobins whose network of branches he had used to tighten his grip on control. As public prosecutor of Paris he found himself permanently based in the capital and soon became a virtual spokesman for the Paris Commune and an influential supporter of the sans-culottes. This increased his standing in the city and led to him being elected First Deputy for Paris in the elections for the Convention. Known as 'the incorruptible' Robespierre built a reputation as one who placed the interests of the revolution before anything else. It was therefore unsurprising that he was elected to the Committee of Public Safety when it was established in April 1793, where he soon began to exercise his influence over the other members.

It can be argued that Robespierre was the driving force behind the expansion of the Terror into the phase known as the Great Terror. As a believer in a 'republic of virtue' he argues that the Republic could only be saved by the virtue of its citizens. According to this logic, those citizens who did not demonstrate virtue or good morals must be enemies of the revolution. Furthermore, since he was the incorruptible representative of the revolution, anyone who opposed Robespierre himself must also be an enemy of the revolution. The key issue here is that Robespierre believed that enemies of the revolution could hide their true nature by faking patriotism. This meant he believed every level of French society – including the Convention itself – could be harbouring traitors, monarchists and saboteurs. Of course the only person who was able to identify them successfully was Robespierre.

It was arguably this self-righteousness and belief in his own epithet as 'the incorruptible' that caused Robespierre's downfall. Having executed his long-term colleague Danton, who was popular among the sans-culottes, Robespierre began to lose the support of the Paris mob. Combined with some of his more wild policies – in particular his attempt to create the Cult of



the Supreme Being – the people of Paris began to search for alternative leaders. Disappearing for more than a week in the middle of July 1794 gave his enemies the perfect opportunity to prepare their attack. When Robespierre returned to make a long and rambling speech in the Convention, he implied that he had a list of Deputies who were enemies of the revolution. At this point his opponents seized their chance. Interpreting his speech as a threat to purge the Convention, he was shouted down, arrested, and then executed on the 28th July 1794 after a botched suicide attempt.

This was known as the Coup of Thermidore and it signalled the beginning of the end for the Terror. Factionalism within the leadership had already begun to tear it apart, while the continued extremism had alienated many French citizens. This was especially the case since the worst problems facing France had appeared to be easing by the summer of 1794. After a final show of bloodshed in the White Terror, the structures of fear were gradually dismantled as part of the Thermidorean Reaction and the revolution entered a new moderate phase with the establishment of the Directory.