

# The reign of terror and the french revolution



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History is said to be written by the winners, but is it possible to rewrite history? In a way, the French, like many who have preceded them, and many who will proceed them have done the impossible, rewriting history. From trivial folklore, such as George Washington chopping down a cherry tree, to the incredibly wrong, the African slave trade; peoples views of history can be shaped and molded. The French have done a superb job of instilling all of us with the concept that their Revolution was a fight for liberty, justice and the good of all Frenchmen everywhere. Their glorification of the Bastille with its depictions in painting and sculpture and how the Revolution was the beginning of a new age pales to some of the events during this period. In fact, the storming of the Bastille was merely a hole in the dike, and more would follow. The National Guard, the Paris Commune, the September Massacre, are all words that the French would prefer us not to hear. These events were a subtle dnouement to an climax that was filled with both blood and pain. The Reign of Terror, or the Great Terror, was a massive culmination to the horror of the French Revolution, the gutters flowing with blood as the people of Paris watched with an entertained eye. No matter what the French may claim, if one chooses to open his eyes and read about this tragedy, they are most certainly welcome.

The revolution begins quietly in the fiscal crisis of Louis XVI's reign. The government was running deeply into bankruptcy, and at the urging of his financial advisors, he called the Estates General. The governing body had not been called for almost two centuries, and now its workings seemed outdated. A small number of people said that the Third Estate, that which was drawn from the towns, should have power to equal the other Estates. Clubs of the

bourgeoisie, the middle class, were formed, proclaiming, " Salus populi lex est." It was a simple cry meaning " the welfare of the people is law." To these people, the Estates General was like a pair of shoes that no longer fit. Reformed seemed imminent, the phrase, " The Third Estate is not an order, it is the nation itself" began to circulate. 1

With much fanfare and circumstance, the three estates were called together. However, on trying to meet, the Third Estate found the doors to their meeting place locked. Moving to the tennis court, with much deliberation, an oath was sworn between the delegates and some clergy, proclaiming themselves as the National Assembly. They swore to remain indivisible until a constitution had been formed. As they met at the church of St. Louis, the King was delayed in his attempt to end this display of independence. Finally, he informed them, that he would not allow any reforms to be made, unless he approved of them. Unfortunately, their will would not be easily undone, and in a vote to four hundred ninety three to ninety four, the National Assembly declared that serious action would be taken against the King. With such an resounding opposition, on June 27th, 1789, Louis XVI gave into their demands.

Educated in Paris, a young man of twenty six years, would be one of the first to set off the spark of revolution. Jumping on top of a table at the Palais Royale, a social gathering place in Paris, he spoke out against the enemies of the people in a well scripted oration. The crowd quickly fawned over their new found hero, marching through the streets of Paris, even interrupting a performance at the Paris opera. Military forces were required to remedy the situation, yet Paris only had six thousand troops with which to defend itself

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against the rampaging mob. At the Place Vendome, the cavalry attempted to control the riot, only to find their horses surrounded and unmovable through the dense crowd.

The officers of the Swiss and Turkish armies attacked the rioters outright, but the garde-nationale was called in to stop this massacre. This chaos caused the Hotel de Ville to demand each tocsin, or summoning bell, cannon, drum, and church bell be used to summon the people of Paris. Drawing from the electoral populace of each section, four thousand and eight hundred men were given the task of protecting Paris, now named the Paris commune. They wore the colors of red and blue, symbolizing the colors of Paris. Armed with cannons and muskets, they had little powder with which to defend Paris.

The Bastille was a prison, built of stone, it had eight round towers, with its highest tower being seventy-three feet. It was built as a defensive fort against the British, and was not converted into a prison until under the rule of Charles VI. To the authors, sculptors and painters who glorified the taking of the Bastille, it was a dark and secret castle, where prisoners never returned from. Each prisoner hung from shackles until their dried bones were pushed into a corner, but the Bastille was nothing like that in reality. It was a prison for nobility, clergy, the occasional scandalous author, and juvenile delinquents whose parents had asked for them to be kept there. Most prisoners had more money spent on them, than it took for an average Parisian to subsist. The living quarters were octagonal rooms, sixteen feet in diameter. Pets were allowed to deal with the vermin, and prisoners were allowed furnishings, clothes, and other personal belongings. Even one of the

most infamous criminals, the demented Marquis de Sade, made his home their, receiving his wife and other visitors on a regular basis.

With only a few prisoners, the Bastille was an ideal place to store large amounts of ammunition. Bernard-Rene de Launay was in control of a force of just over a hundred men that were given the task of defending more than thirty-thousand pounds of powder. In the event of a siege, the Bastille would not be able to hold out long, only containing a two day food supply, and no internal water. The morning of July 14th, a large crowd of over eight hundred people set before the Bastille, calling for its surrender. Delegates were sent in to speak with de Launay, yet he refused to capitulate until orders from the Hotel de Ville were presented to him.

As the orders were being fetched, the crowd grew less patient, until finally a carriage-maker cut the lines of the drawbridge, allowing them access to the inner courtyard. As shots were fired on both side, the siege became imminent. For a day, desperate attempts on both sides finally ending in the surrender of the guards. The guards were then rounded up, decapitated, and their heads were paraded on pikes like the wax busts of French heroes. De Launay was stabbed, rolled into a gutter, then shot before his head was taken as a trophy. By the end of November of 1789, Palloy, a labor leader who had jumped the gun to begin demolition, the crews of Palloy had nearly finished destruction of the Bastille.

The church had become split over those who did or did not support the revolution. The Papacy was on the side of the counter-revolutionaries, and could not support the Kings signing of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy in

1791. The seasons since 1789 had been quiet, violence sporadic and viewed as behind the new way of life in France. Unfortunately, the King did not appreciate his stay in the Tuilleries, and in the summer of 1791, an escape attempt was expected. The palace was surrounded with guards at every gate, river front, and over six hundred national guardsmen watching every possible escape route. Among the servants, a few were informants, and leaving the royal quarters required a pass.

An extremely generous young cavalier, Count von Fersen, was willing to do anything to assist the King and Queen, and so on the night of June 20, 1791, they made their escape. They made it out of the palace, disguised, and made it as far as the town of Varennes in the north east. The ride back to Paris was an ordeal, followed by a mob and the National Guard.

Riots began occurring in Paris, as the sans culottes, or the poor of Paris, sued for their rights. Some sides wished for the kings freedoms, while the left sought to radicalize the revolution even further. The journalists Jacques Hebert and Jean-Paul Marat, they wrote the journals, Le pere Duchesne, and L'Ami du Peuple, respectively. Their attacks on established French Institutions were biting with much venom in their arguments. Marat suffered from a strange skin disease that gave him horrible lesions that reeked and sickened those that were around him. Of the two, he was the more violent insisting that, " Let the blood of the traitors flow. That is the only way to save the country."

In June of 1791, as the King attempted escape from the Tuilleries, the sans culottes armed themselves. Holding aloft a calfs heart they claimed to be the

heart of an aristocrat, they found Louis, forcing him to wear a liberty cap and drink with them. As the weeks past, in the early days of August, the National Assembly declared that Paris would become the Insurrectionary Commune. They removed the royalists from any positions of power, along with replacing lawyers with artisans, and on August the 9th, they began their normal deliberations. A huge crowd of twenty thousand sans culottes called for the King and Queen who had taken refuge with the National Assembly. A crowd broke through the gates, demanding that liberty and equality be maintained. In response, the National Assembly declared that the King be imprisoned and replaced by six ministers.

The mood of Paris changed quite suddenly as stores closed and dignitaries left. Many attempted to escape from the city, fearing what would come. Paranoia in Paris reached a feverous pitch, as the sans culottes feared that royalists, church spies, and counter revolutionaries would endanger the revolution. This fear extended into the government as vigilance committees were setup, passports were revoked, and hundreds were imprisoned if they were a suspected enemy of the revolution. When news of a recent military defeat reached Parisian ears, it was believed that treachery from inside the ranks had been the cause. Danton was a man of action and power, a lawyer, he was described as a "vehement tribune of the people", and "voice of the revolution." In Paris, with scarred facial features due to accidents upon the farm as a boy, Danton had become very powerful in the Insurrectionary Commune, becoming the minister of Justice. His power added to that of the Girondists, a party of lawyers and atheists, who were now the ruling party.

By the beginning of September, Danton was calling for all able men of Paris to arm themselves and search every house to find any “ enemy of the people”. In his paper, Marat supported the execution of all counter revolutionaries. Rumors around Paris circulated that the prisons would be raided, and those inside would be killed. On the afternoon of September 2nd, the violence began as a mob surrounded a number of coaches filled with priests to be brought to the prison of L’Abbaye. The leader leapt onto the coach, thrusting and slicing with his rapier. He shouted to the shocked crowd that watched on, “ So, this frightens you, does it, you cowards? You must get used to the sight of death.” The words were quite prophetic, the even beginning the September Massacres.

Within the next five days over twelve hundred people would be brutally slaughtered by the mass of armed Parisians. The next to be slaughtered was a group of one hundred and fifty priests. As they were decapitated, one of the priest’s demanded a fair trial. A mock tribunal was set up, and the priests were decapitated one by one, their body’s thrown into a well. Every prison, save for the ones that contained the prostitutes and debtors, was broken into as the *septembriseurs*, named for the month, slaughtered those in side. They stopped only to eat and drink, sometimes on the naked corpses that littered the ground. Strangely enough, a few lives were spared, by either compassion or sheer luck, but it was nothing compared to the disgusting brutality with which many of the murders were committed. One woman, charged with mutilating her lover, had her breasts cut off as she was nailed to the ground, a bonfire set under her spread legs. One *septembriseur* sliced open the chest of a noble, removing the heart, squeezing it into a glass, and



after drinking a sip, and forced Mme de Sombreuil to drink to save her father. Undoubtedly, one of the most gruesome acts was that of the Princess de Lamballe. She was raped, her body mutilated and her breasts sliced off. Her legs were shot off by a cannon, and her genitals were cut off and paraded around Paris on a pike. The man who had cut off her genitals had also supposedly cooked and eaten her heart. Her head was placed upon a bar at a cafe' where those there were asked to drink to her death, before her head was placed on a pike and paraded under the Queen's window.

At Bicetre, it was claimed that the prisoners were revolting, and that they had to be put down. However, the prison held a large number of adolescents who were detained there by their parents wish. Forty three people were killed, all under the age of eighteen, of the one hundred and sixty two prisoners. By the end, the septembrisers were not pursued, in fact, some in the commune commended their deeds as a necessary culling. To the outlying Provinces, the killing of nearly half of the prisoners of Paris, was a clear message. In the two weeks proceeding the deaths, members of the church and supporters of the king were executed.

However, these troubles were soon followed by the battle of Valmy, which the army of France had defeated the Prussians. If the leader of the Prussian army, the Duke of Brunswick, would have moved swiftly enough, Paris might have been taken, ending the revolution. However, reports have it that Danton paid Brunswick to retreat back into Germany. The citizens in Paris left their thoughts of murder and celebrated the great victory. Goethe, a German novelist, concluded that, " Here and today begins a new era in the history of the world." as he watched the battle from a hill side. The

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statement found its truth in Frances use of the citizen as a soldier, and the mobilization of such a massive force.

A new force met at Paris, the next day. On September 21st, 1792, the National Convention met. It looked like its predecessors, composed of mostly the middle class with a few clergy and nobility, endorsing the Girondin. However, the more conservative Girondin were prevented from voting in Paris, allowing the radical Jacobin to gain power.

However, one of the first acts of the Convention was to abolish the monarchy, and began the New Republic, with its own strange calendar. However, the Convention was deeply divided, as the Girondin repeatedly tried to attack the Mountain, the highest seats in the convention that belonged to the Jacobin leadership. Yet the Girondin blatantly opposed the Parisians, their septembriseurs, and their Commune. They were in support of the trying the king, but the Montagard, the Mountain, along with Danton, would chose only to condemn him. Their deliberations on his fate lasted until the winter months of the year.

By January, the King was in trial. On the 20th of the new year, the King was tried, found guilty, and was sentenced to be executed the following day. The Girondins hoped to save the king from death by proposing a bill to the people of France. However, their attempts were futile, and only served to anger the sans culottes. Those that gathered to watch the guillotining were mainly the angry poor, and when the blade came down, they threw their hats in the air shouting, " Vive la Nation! Vive la Republique!"

Yet, not all was as well as it seemed for the Revolution. The enemies of the people had extended into foreign borders as European nations condemned the execution of Louis XVI. The value of their money had lessened, food was becoming more and more scarce, and the cost of living rose. The Convention took a united stand against the violence of the sans culottes but still persecuted the counter revolutionaries. The problems they faced were no small matter, especially the peasant rebellion occurring in the Vendee. The peasants were loyal to the King, and anti-republican, not wishing to participate in the drafting for the National Guard. Attacking government offices and forcing the National Guard to retreat. The force of some ten thousand peasants were quickly move to Rochefort to open the port for a British Invasion fleet. The Vendee was not the only spot of counter revolution, as troops were sent to Lyons, Nantes, Bordeaux and Marseille to crush anti-revolutionary support.

They dealt with the enemies of the people by setting up a Revolutionary Tribunal, with which to try those who would otherwise have been killed by the sans culottes. Despite the objections of Vergniaud, a member of the Convention who shouted " Septembre" as they deliberated, the Tribunal began its operations. The Convention decided to form the Committee of Public Safety, as foreign invasion became a more real threat. This cabinet would soon become the most powerful governing body, and Danton held one of the nine positions.

Yet the Girondins had no support from the people of Paris, making the mistake of bringing Marat, a prominent Jacobin, before the Revolutionary Tribunal. Marat was easily acquitted, but they summoned him again. The

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argument was over corn prices, and the Jacobin stand of lowering them only won them more favor with the sans culottes. On Sunday June 2nd, a few days after a protest by the sans culottes, the Convention arrested the leading Girondins in the Convention, as the Tuilleries was surrounded by an angry mob of tens of thousands of sans culottes.

The Committee seemed unfit to deal with the new problems that quickly became evident. The Austrians were quickly advancing into French territory, and counter revolutionaries in Lyons had seized control, executing Republican leaders. Toulon, the royalists were handing over twenty six of Frances sixty one frigates over the Lord Hood, commander of the British navy. However, Maximilien Robespierre joined the Committee and would soon become the dominant revolutionary force. A man known for his virtue and upright moral standing, his rise to through the Jacobin club and the Assembly was that his ideas were supported by the Assembly and the people.

In Paris, the Enrage, a group of those who wanted death to all who opposed the revolution and had guided the now abolished Insurrectionary Commune, still troubled the government. Varlet still cried out for the needs of the poor and spurred them to riot against the price of food. The Committee was forced to deal with these problems when a supporter of the Girondin, Charlotte Corday, assassinated Marat as he lay in his therapeutic bath on July 13th. His death caused him to become a martyr to the radicals, much to Ropespierres envy, and the Committee was forced by the prodding of the Enrages to institute warehouses to store the grain in Paris and give the death penalty to those that hoarded.

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The Committee also had to worry about its critics that followed Danton, who was now President of the Convention after losing his seat to Robespierre. The Hebertists followed the freed journalist, who accused the Jacobins of ignoring him after he helped them overthrow the Girondin. With so much pressure, the Committee authorized the destruction of all federalists, royalists, and other counter revolutionaries. Those rebelling in the provinces were quickly dealt with. Still, the opposers wanted more, and a revolution on the Hotel de Ville, forced the Convention to allow the Hebertists, Varenne and Herbois into the Committee, and they declared that " Terror be the order of the day."

Along with the Queen, the twenty two Girondin leaders that had been arrested were also brought to the guillotine in the same month. The former president of the Convention, and converted noble, the Duc dOrleans, more commonly known as Philippe Egalite was sentenced to death by the Tribunal also. The once mayor of Paris, Jean Bailly was also executed.

The purpose of these killings that lasted in and out through the fall and winter of 1793 was the Committees ruthless drive to destroy any and all enemies of the people, royalists and federalists alike. All in a effort to gain support from the sans culottes to continue their one handed control of France. The guillotine had struck over seventeen thousand necks in the Terror, and three thousand of those belonged to Parisians. Those who survived lived through the Terror fearing a knock on the door that would be their arrest. Robespierre himself said, " We must rule by iron those who cannot be ruled by justice You must punish not merely traitors but the indifferent as well." Yet, those who were brought before the Tribunal were <https://assignbuster.com/the-reign-of-terror-and-the-french-revolution/>

not just the enemies of the people, they were women, children, families, the elderly, and every social class was represented. Those who shed tears for the loss of their family were executed also, those who dared make the smallest misstep were dealt with harshly, the penalty death. The innocent lost their lives through clerical error, and some were killed being falsely accused by neighbors or enemies who wanted vengeance.

In the Provinces, the guillotine could not work fast enough for some, and Joseph Fouché, a Jacobin representative, killed over three hundred with cannon fire. At Toulon, they were shot, at Nantes, thousands died in the disease ridden prisons, and thousands more were sunk in barges, causing ships that anchored to pull out corpses. To the sans culottes of Paris, it was a lively entertainment. They drank and ate, some placed bets, while others knitted. They eagerly anticipated the sounds of the execution, and death was a trivial thing.

A young and eloquent opponent of the Girondins, Chaumette, led the movement of de-Christianization. He pushed for the republican calendar, likening its divisions to the divisions of the highest Reason. Religious holidays and services were suspended, treasures of the church were seized, images of Mary replaced with Marat, and any religious paraphernalia was strictly prohibited. Festivals of Reason were celebrated, with prostitutes or others such women playing the head of all Reason, the Goddess of Reason. Towns, streets, squares all changed their names. Revolutionary names were much more popular than saintly names in some districts. Yet, religion could not be easily undone, and still its hold was seen on France as threatening “

acts of God" would force peasants back into the churches to ask for forgiveness.

The war of a political nature raged silently, as the different factions of the Convention dared not fight openly. Upon returning to Paris, Danton immediately took the side of Robespierre, condemning the Enrages and the Hebertists. However, Robespierre would not be easily won over by Danton. He believed that Danton wished to separate the Committee and the sans culottes to protect himself and his friends. Robespierres course of action was to crush both factions by use of the Tribunal.

The Hebertists fell easily, many of their members being accused of a foreign plot. When they planned a journee to revolt, this gave the Committee its final nail, and drove it into the coffin of the Hebertists. Hebert and his followers were put to the guillotine March 14th, 1794.

As for Danton, he had made many powerful enemies, all of which ardently spoke out against him. In spite of this Danton had little fear from these men, taunting and threatening them, believing that Robespierre would stick by him no matter what. Soon, their friendship grew weak, and on March 30th, the Committees of Public Safety and General Security met together. Saint-Just, a cold and calculating follower of Robespierre, produced the document to arrest Danton. At the trial was Camille Desmoulins, and many other accused. On April 3rd, they were sent to the guillotine, and eighteen men were put under the blade.

Following in their path was Chaumette and even the widow of Camille, Lucille Desmoulins. The bloodshed only increased as the law of Prairial was passed, <https://assignbuster.com/the-reign-of-terror-and-the-french-revolution/>

and the Tribunal no longer needed to bother with a trial. Of the fifteen hundred that died in the final eight weeks of the terror, only a small portion of the beheaded were noblemen or clergy, the remaining eighty five percent coming from the people, the peasants, and those who had begun the revolution. Robespierre was far too virtuous to watch the executions, but he stated that, " At the point where we are now, if we stop too soon we will die. We have not been too severe. Without the revolutionary Government the Republic cannot be made stronger. If it is destroyed now, freedom will be extinguished tomorrow." As Danton had shouted at the Tribunal, " You will follow us, Robespierre.", the Revolution would soon be over.

By Autumn of the same year, the Revolution turned decidedly to the right as the Robespierrists were sent from the Convention. He had gradually lost control of both Committee and Convention, and by July 27th, in the month of Thermidor, he was arrested. After being badly beaten, he was brought to the guillotine, and a newspaper reported, " The tyrant is no more." The government changed hands throughout the next year as the Jacobins were disbanded, and the Girondin returned to the Convention. It too was altogether disbanded as the Directory was set up in a rather feeble attempt to retain control of the republic. Even though Napoleon did not gain control until one year before the next century, the people of France no longer wanted their revolution.

For my conclusion, I would like to step back and deliver my own opinion. In my brief time on this planet, I have never come across a more brutal depiction of man at his worst. The sad truth is that events of this nature have occurred with amazing regularity. Perhaps if the Reign of Terror was just one

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appalling moment of human cruelty, the world would be a different place. With such things as the Gulag, the Holocaust, the African Slave Trade, and even returning back to ancient times of the Assyrians and the Crusades, man has been known to slaughter his brethren wholesale. We are a race, bred with violence coursing through our veins, and we can do little about it. Perhaps my speculations are wrong, but if such tragedies have occurred over and over, can we truly ever change. The Reign of Terror is just the culmination to the bloodiness and the atrocities of the French Revolution. It is quite ironic that a Revolution based on the ideals of Reason and the fight for the people, would kill over thirty thousand of their countrymen. In conclusion, the Reign of Terror was the climax of this terrible Revolution. The violence and paranoia of the sans culottes, the lust for political power in the convention, and the petty differences of one person to another finally reached a head, exploding into a mass execution.

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