

The Reign of Terror

Jacobins

The most famous political group of the French Revolution was the Jacobins. Also known as the Society of the Friends of the Constitution, the club originally met at Versailles, organized by deputies of the Estates-General (and then National Assembly). They later met as a club in Paris. By July 1790, their membership grew to about 1,200 Parisian members, with 152 affiliate clubs; the number of members continued to grow thereafter. The club's main concern was to protect what the revolutionaries had achieved so far—and prevent any reaction from the aristocracy. This desire resulted in the Reign of Terror. The Jacobins felt that it was their duty to catch anyone suspected of opposing the Revolution. The Jacobins also led the dechristianizing movement and organized Revolutionary festivals.

Maximilien Robespierre

Possibly the most well-known Jacobin was Maximilien Robespierre. He was trained as a lawyer and practiced law by representing poor people. When the Estates-General was summoned in 1789, the Third Estate elected him as one of their deputies. He was thirty years old.

Robespierre was a quiet, simple man, with a weak voice. Yet he was able to make himself heard. He spoke more than five hundred times during the life of the National Assembly, and it was here that he gained supporters. He was a philosopher and sided with the ideals of the Enlightenment. He used this background to help shape the Declaration of the Rights of Man. He was a proponent of everything the Declaration stood for. He believed in equal rights, the right to hold office and join the national guard, and the right to petition. He was against religious and racial discrimination, the royal veto, and abuse of power. He was a voice of the people. He hailed the value of liberty. He was able to reach the masses through his leadership in the Jacobins.

While many praised Robespierre's fervency, others saw it as a threat. The same faction that caused the death of Marat accused Robespierre of dictatorship from the first sessions of the National Convention. Robespierre called for the king's death, but the death did not end the conflict between the left-wingers and the right-wingers of the convention. Robespierre's next endeavor was as a member of the Committee of Public Safety. Through this role, he continued to promote the efforts of the revolutionaries and to denounce the schemes of the Parisian radicals. However, his thoughts turned more extreme. He intensified the efforts of the Reign of Terror in order to bring about mass conscription. It wasn't long before his influence declined, and he eventually was removed from the National Convention, imprisoned in the Conciergerie, and eventually guillotined in front of a cheering mob in 1794.

The Committee of Public Safety

The Committee of Public Safety was created by the National Convention in 1793 with the intent to defend the nation against foreign and domestic enemies, as well as to oversee the new functions of the executive government. Members were elected and served for a period of one month. There were originally nine members, but that later increased to twelve.

One of the original members was Georges Danton. He and several other members were quite persuasive in advocating a model of moderation and reconciliation within the committee. These men did not effectively deal with the military issues at the time, and they were replaced by more radical defenders of the Revolution. One of these new members was Maximilien Robespierre. For the next year (1793–1794), this more radical group controlled the committee, which essentially was controlling France and the National Convention. Their biggest support came from the Jacobins. With their backing, and their prodding, the committee started to exercise dictatorial control over the French government.

The Law of Suspects and the Reign of Terror

With Robespierre at the helm, the Committee of Public Safety made some bold moves. It responded with terror against the Revolution's enemies, making certain crimes capital offenses, and giving power to local revolutionary committees to arrest "those who by their conduct, relations or language spoken or written, have shown themselves partisans of tyranny or federalism and enemies of liberty." By this decree, more than two hundred thousand citizens were arrested. Many did not stand trial—because there were so many—but they did have to withstand jail time. An estimated ten thousand died in jail. The tribunals found seventeen thousand guilty, mostly for charges of armed rebellion. A guilty finding typically resulted in being sent to the guillotine.

In addition to the mass imprisonments and executions, the committee explored other ways to sow fear and control counterrevolutionaries. The committee authorized local authorities throughout France to create small military forces to patrol the countryside. The forces helped raise enthusiasm for the Revolution, but they also created a strict environment for the *sans culottes*, subdued by the ever-present fear of military force. In addition, the committee put aside a new democratic constitution that the convention had recently drafted, which had incorporated popular demands for equality and various rights. Without these rights in effect, the convention continued to rule with an absolute sovereignty more strict and rigid than that of the old monarchies.

The Reign of Terror was an assault on the people of France. The committee enforced a terrorist mentality on the France's citizens. The Law of Suspects, which had the intent of defending the nation through legal recourse, ironically tried to make terror lawful.