

# French Revolution



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Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by The Alden Group, Oxford.

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# Introduction

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This course provides basic historical background to the French Revolution. It will show that the Revolution accelerated intellectual, cultural and psychological change, and opened up new horizons and possibilities. In fact, while much controversy and scepticism remain as to the real extent of underlying change in the social and economic structure of France, it is generally agreed by scholars that the Revolution stimulated a widening of expectations and imaginative awareness: a belief, inherited from the Enlightenment, in the possibility of progress, as well as a conviction that state and society could be reconstituted with a view to realising social and individual aspirations and human happiness generally. As it degenerated into violence and bloodshed, however, the Revolution also provoked scepticism and pessimism about progress and human nature. The two basic types of modern political outlook, progressive and conservative, date from this experience. Which, if any, of these sets of beliefs was true is not at issue here. What matters is that the Revolution gave rise to them and gave them lasting life.

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# Learning Outcomes

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After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand the main events of the French Revolution 1789–99 and its significance in the shift in European culture from Enlightenment to Romanticism
- appreciate the French Revolution and its significance through exposure to selected contemporary texts, documents and illustrations of the period.

# 1 Enlightenment, liberty and revolution

The main aim of this course is to provide you with basic historical background on the French Revolution, which marked a watershed in the history and culture of the period 1780–1830. The documents and illustrations associated with it are there to illustrate and bring out the points made. The first exercise is preceded by an extended preamble designed to facilitate your reading and understanding of the first document. This should in turn point a way towards engaging with other documents and illustrations associated with the course.

The French Revolution, or at least its impact on France and Europe, lies at the heart of the cultural shift from Enlightenment to Romanticism. It not only marked a decisive break in the history of France and Europe, but also accelerated intellectual, cultural and psychological change. It opened up new horizons and possibilities. Indeed, while there remain much controversy and scepticism as to the real extent of underlying change in the social and economic structure of France, scholars generally agree that the Revolution brought a widening of expectations and imaginative awareness: a belief, inherited from the Enlightenment, in the possibility of progress, as well as a conviction that state and society could be reconstituted with a view to realising social and individual aspirations and human happiness generally. As it degenerated into violence and bloodshed, however, the Revolution also provoked scepticism and pessimism about progress and human nature. The two basic types of modern political outlook, progressive and conservative, date from this experience. Which, if any, of these sets of beliefs was true is not at issue here. What matters is that the Revolution gave rise to them and gave them lasting life.

It is not possible in one course to do justice to the complexity of the French Revolution, whose significance preoccupied contemporaries and has continued to engage historians ever since. Suffice it to say that it was, and was considered by those who lived through it to be, the most momentous turning-point in modern history thus far, 'a traumatic convulsion' (Doyle, 2001, p. 2) that made its impact on the way people lived and thought across Europe throughout most of this period. The revolutionaries themselves recognised the break with the past by naming the social and political order before 1789 the 'Old Regime' (*ancien régime*).

The Revolution aroused the deepest passions, from ardent enthusiasm to inveterate hostility. Some of its enemies attributed it to a conspiracy hatched by freemasons or even by leading figures of the Enlightenment. Catherine the Great of Russia, once the darling of two of those leading figures, Voltaire and Diderot, was by 1794 voicing the suspicion 'that the aim of the *philosophes* was to overturn all thrones, and that the *Encyclopédie* was written with no other end in view than to destroy all kings and all religions' (Lentin, 1985, p. 269). This was a wild exaggeration, but it illustrates the shock caused by the Revolution, and it raises the important question how far the Revolution was a result of the Enlightenment. Others stress the role of chance and personality in the Revolution (for example, the weakness or folly of the French king and queen, the fanaticism of the Jacobins) and the pressure of events and forces (mass violence, civil war, invasion) which took on a momentum of their own, often overwhelming and sometimes destroying the revolutionaries themselves. This course condenses a sequence of tumultuous happenings in France and Europe in the decade 1789–99 (and a bewildering succession of political constitutions and legislative acts), in order to focus on the Revolution's more important stages or turning-points and their significance.

The main target of the Revolution was the political and social privilege entrenched under the Old Regime. Power in Europe rested, as it had for centuries, with a privileged nobility. Social status and political influence depended on birth, hereditary title to land or office (which could also be purchased), and unearned income derived from land and the right to peasants' contributions in cash, kind or labour. In France, in the generation before the Revolution, almost every one of the king's ministers, provincial governors and bishops was a nobleman. The watchword 'liberty' sums up the main slogan and aspiration of the Revolution: liberation from political despotism, social exclusion and discrimination. The second watchword, closely related to liberty, was 'equality'. Both 'liberty' and 'equality' were supposed to be inspired by and suffused with a third – 'fraternity' or brotherly love. The historian Francois Furet insists that the appeal of liberty, equality and fraternity, which proved so infectious, stemmed from what he calls the Revolution's 'deepest motivating force: hatred of the aristocracy' (Furet, 1996, p. 51). Be that as it may, on the eve of the Revolution, 'in all countries the distinction between the noble or gentleman and the rest of the population was the cardinal fact of social life' (Hampson, 1969, p. 55).

## 2 Death of the Old Regime

### 2.1 The bankrupt monarchy

The immediate cause of the Revolution was that the French monarchy faced imminent bankruptcy. (This was partly because of the enormous sums it had spent assisting the American Revolution between 1778 and 1781 in order to discomfort the traditional enemy, Britain.) Neither nobility nor clergy paid direct tax. Without the consent of the established orders of society to a reorganization of the tax burden so as to restore its finances, the government could no longer function. Successive ministers tried to win over influential sections of the nobility to various reform proposals, with inconclusive results. In 1788 the helpless King Louis XVI was advised to turn for help to the nation as a whole in the shape of its representatives duly elected and convened in ancient form: the **Estates-General**.

On 5 May 1789, this body was therefore assembled at Versailles for the first time since 1614. It consisted of elected representatives of the three orders or estates of the realm: clergy, nobility and the **Third Estate**, or commoners, the remaining 95 per cent of the population. The representatives of the Third Estate were mainly officials, lawyers, landowners and merchants. If the precedent of 1614 was followed, each of the orders would assemble separately, and if the clergy and nobility voted as estates, they could outvote the Third Estate by two to one. In 1789, however, 'nobody knew what the Estates-General would do ... There was a complete vacuum of power. The French Revolution was the process by which this vacuum was filled' (Doyle, 2001, p. 36).

### 2.2 The Third Estate as the voice of the nation

Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès (1748–1836) trained as a priest and became assistant to a bishop. He had no religious vocation, however, and his fame arose as the author of a highly influential pamphlet, *What is the Third Estate?*, published in January 1789, on the strength of which Sieyès was elected a deputy to the Estates-General. Four editions or

30,000 copies of the book came out within months of its appearance, at a time of heightened consciousness that great changes were afoot. What is Sieyès's argument, how does he present it, and what is the significance of his book?

### 2.2.1 Sample analysis and discussion of 'What is the Third Estate?'

Let us take a closer look at part of this document before attempting the exercise below. This preamble should help you to relate to similar exercises in this course. The document is quite long, by far the longest one associated with this course; but you should not find it difficult to read it through fairly quickly and to extract its main points, to grasp Sieyès's 'message', and to note how he conveyed it. After you have read it through once, *re-read* it from the beginning up to 'a nation within a nation'.

Click to view *The Third Estate*.

The fact of its immediate success and large print run already suggests that *What is the Third Estate?* was crisply written, had a clear and timely message, and was readily and immediately understood and appreciated. Sieyès is methodical, concise and to the point. He tells us straightaway that 'we have three questions to ask ourselves' about the Third Estate. He sets out those three questions in numerical order. To each question he gives a one-word answer. He then states, 'We shall see if these are the right answers', and undertakes to provide 'the supporting evidence'.

This down-to-earth, systematic approach is very much in the style and spirit of the *Encyclopédie* in its clarity of presentation, its promise of logical argument based on supporting evidence, and its conclusions critical of existing institutions. Sieyès does not express his conclusions as views personal to himself but as demonstrable statements of objective *fact* (set out under points 4, 5 and 6).

In the next paragraph he asks, 'What is a nation?', and proceeds to give a definition. Again, his method and his objective are clear and logical. You will note, however, that this time he does not offer any supporting evidence for his statement. Why not? Presumably, he believed that his definition was self-evident and would be found so by his readers, as indeed it was.

Sieyès's basic idea of a nation was not new. It drew on Enlightenment concepts familiar to any educated reader. Diderot, in his article 'Political authority' published in the *Encyclopédie* in 1751, discussed terms and ideas which by 1789 had become the staple of political thought. He argued that sovereignty, or ultimate political power in a state, derives not from the monarch but from the 'people' or 'nation', that it must be exercised in their interest and for their benefit, that it should be controlled and circumscribed by laws, and that the ruler's tenure of office is in the nature of a trust exercised for the people's benefit and with their consent, underpinned by an implicit agreement or 'social contract' (Gendzier, 1967, pp. 185–8).

Against this familiar background, Sieyès takes a further easy and logical step by postulating another characteristic of a nation: namely, that it has an elected, *representative* legislative (law-making) assembly. This too follows implicitly from ideas popularized in the *Encyclopédie*, but it received a tremendous additional boost, first from the success of the American Revolution and the summoning of a constitutional convention by the United States in 1787, and now in France by the summoning of the Estates-General. The French people, or nation, were at last to be 'represented' in an assembly or, as it was soon to be called, a **National Assembly**, through which it too would be enabled to express its political will, frame its own laws and shape its own national destiny.



After this definition of a nation, uncontroversial in its Enlightenment borrowings but now suddenly fresh and revolutionary in its immediate relevance in 1789, Sieyès makes a further claim, all the more unexpected because of the equable tone and calm logic employed by him thus far. He suddenly claims that the nobility, by reason of its 'privileges and exemptions', is not part of the nation at all, but 'a nation within a nation'. This, he states rhetorically, 'is only too clear, isn't it'. The reader will take the implicit point (soon to be made explicit) that not only is this indeed the case, but that such a situation is illogical, unjust and wrong, no longer tenable or tolerable. Sieyès's purpose is to isolate and marginalise the nobility in his readers' eyes, and to expose it to their critical censure. In the circumstances of 1789, his message took on startling implications about the respective roles of the nobility and the Third Estate in the Estates-General.

Now go to p.72 of the document (from 'To sum up ...' to '... becoming *something?*', p. 73). We see here a reference to another Enlightenment touchstone – 'the rights of man' – and also to the 'petitions' (*cahiers de doléances*) which the representatives at the Estates-General brought with them from their constituents. In invoking 'the rights of man', Sieyès again draws on a common background and strikes a common chord with his readers in his references to the political terminology of the Enlightenment. Again, too, in mentioning the petitions, there is the striking topicality of his comments as the Estates-General assembled to air the nation's grievances.

But Sieyès refers only fleetingly to the rights of man. His main point in this passage relates to something else, though closely related to it: 'equality'. Equality was another emotive catchword derived from the Enlightenment. In his article on 'Natural equality' in the *Encyclopédie* (1755), de Jaucourt states that 'natural equality' is based on 'the constitution of human nature common to all men ... Each person must value and treat other people as so many individuals who are naturally equal to himself' (Gendzier, 1967, p. 169). True, de Jaucourt then goes on to say that 'I know too well the necessity of different ranks, grades, honours, distinctions, prerogatives, subordinations that must prevail in all governments' (Gendzier, 1967, p. 170). De Jaucourt may be being ironic here, or he may be perfectly serious. Be that as it may, Sieyès is certainly serious in his complaint concerning the *inequality* of representation in the Estates-General of the Third Estate in relation to the other two estates (church and nobility). The Third Estate, he says, *demand*s that the number of its representatives be equal to that of the two other orders put together' (emphasis added);

### Exercise 1

Now read from "With regard to its *political* rights" to "going back in time a bit." Briefly (in about 100 words) (i) explain in your own words what Sieyès has to say about the Third Estate and the nobility, and (ii) describe his tone.

- 1 Sieyès makes the revolutionary claim that the Third Estate itself constitutes the nation and should be adequately represented; that the nobility is over-privileged, exclusive, unrepresentative of the nation and over-represented in the Estates-General; and that the Estates-General should sit as a single integrated body, not divided into social orders and meeting in separate venues. Sieyès thus raises to the fore 'the quintessential revolutionary idea ... equality' (Furet, 1996, p.45).
- 2 Sieyès's tone is confident, belligerent, uncompromising and inflammatory. His radical demands on behalf of the Third Estate largely take the form of blunt and open attacks on the nobility as a separate (and self-regarding) estate of the realm.

The significance of Sieyès's pamphlet lay in its 'consciousness-raising'. His defiant radicalism captured the mood of the 648 representatives of the Third Estate and inspired them to thumb their noses at the nobility or 'aristocrats', as he also calls them. (By 1789 and thanks partly to Sieyès, the word 'aristocrat' had become a term of abuse synonymous with undeserved privilege.)

On 17 June the deputies of the Third Estate unilaterally declared the assembly of their own members to be the true representative voice of the French nation: the 'National Assembly'. If the clergy and nobility wanted a voice in shaping the future of France, they must sit in the National Assembly as equals with the Third Estate. The pamphlet was both 'a treatise and a battle-cry' (Furet, 1996, p.48), a justification of and a summons to revolutionary action. On 20 June, finding itself locked out, the Third Estate, calling itself the National Assembly, withdrew to a nearby indoor tennis court and declared, in the so-called '**tennis-court oath**', that it would not disperse until it had provided France with a new, written constitution. It deliberately and expressly excluded the nobility and clergy as such from the body politic. The National Assembly had seized power in the name of the French nation. The Revolution had begun.

## 2.3 Fall of the Bastille, 14 July 1789

In a similar mood of aggrieved self-righteousness and revolutionary exultation came the fall of the Bastille, the medieval fortress and prison of Paris, on 14 July 1789. A catastrophic harvest in 1788 had provoked food riots in Paris and elsewhere. Louis XVI, alarmed both by this unrest and by the unexpected belligerence of the Third Estate, called troops into Paris to maintain order. It was feared that he also aimed to suppress the National Assembly, which rallied its supporters. The Parisian electors, those qualified to choose the city's representatives to the Estates-General, raised a militia of 48,000 men, the National Guard, to protect the Assembly. Its commander was the liberal-minded Marquis de Lafayette (1757–1834), who had fought as a volunteer with the American revolutionaries. The National Guard was short of arms. On 14 July, having ransacked the Invalides for muskets and cannons, it marched on the Bastille in search of gunpowder. When the governor, de Launay, appeared to offer resistance, it stormed the prison. De Launay and the chief city magistrate were lynched, their heads stuck on pikes and paraded about.

The event seemed to its supporters literally epoch-making. In fact, the Bastille in 1789 only contained eight prisoners (including lunatics and, until the week before its fall, the Marquis de Sade), but it had once briefly housed as state prisoners such leading figures of the Enlightenment as Voltaire and Diderot. Its fall was felt to symbolize the unstoppable might of the Revolution sweeping away the tyranny, oppression and injustice of the past. An English eyewitness reported that the news 'produced an impression on the crowd really indescribable ... such an instantaneous and unanimous emotion of extreme gladness as I should suppose was never before experienced by human beings' (quoted in Hampson, 1975, p. 72). The British ambassador agreed: 'The greatest revolution that we know anything of has been effected with ... the loss of very few lives. From this moment we may consider France as a free country; the King a limited [that is, constitutional] monarch and the nobility as reduced to a level with the rest of the nation' (quoted in Townson, 1990, p. 34). To Charles James Fox, leader of the English party in opposition, the fall of the Bastille was 'the most glorious event, and the happiest for mankind, that has ever taken place since human affairs have been recorded' (quoted in Rudé, 1966, p. 181).

In France, the anniversary of the taking of the Bastille became an annual festival. Its significance as marking the passing of the Old Regime was commonly celebrated (as in the American War of Independence) by planting 'trees of liberty' as symbols of national regeneration. The king was constrained to accept the flag of the Revolution devised by Lafayette, the tricolour (red, white and blue), and to wear its colours on his cockade.

Click to view *Gustav III of Sweden's letter on the fall of the Bastille*.

### Exercise 2

Now read the second document (letter from Gustav III, absolute ruler of Sweden, August 1789. Gustav had just learned of the event from his ambassador in Paris. Briefly state what the letter tells us (i) about the storming of the Bastille and (ii) about Gustav's reaction to it as compared with that of the British ambassador just quoted.

Factually, Gustav's letter provides an accurate account of the event. From his language, however, it is clear that, as he admits, he is a hostile commentator, deeply shocked at the breakdown of public order represented by the storming of the Bastille, the mob lynching of the governor, fraternization between the royal guards ('the French and Swiss guards') and 'the people', and the claims of the National Assembly ('the Estates'). He notes the role of popular violence and bloodshed, dismissed by the British ambassador as 'the loss of very few lives'.

Gustav is alarmed at the humiliation which all this represents for Louis XVI – a surrender of power by absolute monarchy. The French monarchy is on the way to becoming a constitutional monarchy, with ministers responsible to the Assembly. The British ambassador approves of the event as marking the advent of 'a free country'. Gustav abominates it, and laments Louis' appearance before the Assembly on 15 July not to give orders but 'to request assistance' and 'almost to apologise'. The letter confirms that the fall of the Bastille was seen by critics as well as enthusiasts as a significant (Gustav says 'terrible') blow to the Old Regime. Gustav fears for the king's throne.

## 2.4 Enlightened reformism – dismantling the Old Regime

The National Assembly, the self-proclaimed and now *de facto* supreme representative and legislative organ of state, set to work on the constitution which it had sworn to introduce. Calling itself the **Constituent Assembly** (to stress both its representative credentials and its constitutional mission), it consisted of 745 deputies elected for two years with virtually unlimited power to pass laws. The king, by interposing his veto, might delay but could not override laws passed by it.

Between 1789 and 1791 the Assembly implemented a transformation of French institutions, marking a clear break with the Old Regime by its sweeping application of the principle of equality. In a series of revolutionary decrees between 4 and 11 August 1789, it removed at one fell swoop the social and administrative foundations of the Old Regime. The Assembly decreed the abolition of 'the feudal system in its entirety' and with it the removal of privilege in France: the abolition of church tithes (in addition to drawing revenues from its ownership of a tenth of the land, the Church drew a tithe equivalent to

one-tenth of the yield of the remaining land) and all rents, taxes and services due from peasants to noble landowners (notably rents paid in kind and the *corvée*, or forced labour on road repairs); abolition of seigneurial law courts; abolition of the sale of offices and an end to the exemption from direct taxation enjoyed by church and nobility. It proclaimed the comprehensive principle of equality: social equality, equality before the law, equal liability to taxation, and equality of opportunity. 'All citizens,' it decreed, 'without distinction of birth, are eligible for all offices, whether ecclesiastical, civil or military' (Hardman, 1999, p. 113). The nobility thus lost its automatic monopoly of the higher offices of state.

## 2.5 Declaration of the Rights of Man

On 26 August 1789, the Assembly passed the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* as the preamble to a constitution drawn up in 1791. (The Declaration also prefaced the later constitutions of 1793 and 1795.)

[Click to view \*Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen\*.](#)

### Exercise 3

Now read this document (above). How far do you see in it the influence of the Enlightenment? What was revolutionary about it?

The principles contained in the Declaration and described there as 'simple and incontrovertible' were familiar to the deputies from the *Encyclopédie* (and also from the American Revolution). They derived from the Enlightenment and were invoked in the petitions (*cahiers de doléances*), the lists of grievances which the delegates had drawn up for the meeting of the Estates-General. What made them revolutionary was that for the first time in European history they were formally incorporated and proclaimed in a document of state, which declared that the 'purpose of all political institutions' was to guarantee the citizens' 'natural rights' (civil rights or human rights, as we call them now). These rights were declared to be inalienable: that is, citizens could not divest themselves of them (for example, by selling them) or be deprived of them by subsequent legislation. They were to be entrenched in the constitution.

Article 1 reaffirmed the principle of equality: 'Men are born and remain free and equal in ... rights; social distinctions can only be based on public utility' (as opposed to noble birth or status). The rights of man included freedom from arbitrary arrest and imprisonment, freedom of opinion and speech, the right to a voice in the levying of taxes, the right to own property, equality before the law, and (as we have seen) equality of opportunity in access to government posts.

There was one crucial limitation: the rights of man did not apply to women. The (male) revolutionaries were largely hostile to the cause of women's suffrage, though women took part in some of the events of the Revolution and their cause was championed by such distinguished writers as Condorcet (1743–94), one of the younger *philosophes* of the Enlightenment. In 1793 women were to be expressly excluded from the rights of citizens. The feminist Olympe de Gouges, author of *The Declaration of the Rights of Woman and Citizen* (1791), was to fall victim to the Terror in 1793.

Also revolutionary in the European context was the assertion in the Declaration that sovereignty resided with the nation, not with the king (a claim made in the *Encyclopédie*, as we have seen, and vindicated in the American Revolution). In October 1789, absolute

monarchy was formally abolished and replaced by constitutional monarchy. The Assembly decreed that Louis XVI was 'by the grace of God *and the constitutional law of the State*, King of the French' (emphasis added).

Click to view *The Decree on the abolition of nobility*.

#### Exercise 4

Now read the decree on the abolition of nobility (above), June 1790 . Do you notice any similarity with *What is the Third Estate?* by Sieyès?

The decree implements precisely what Sieyès and his fellow deputies of the Third Estate demanded: the outright abolition of the nobility as a separate social order. Henceforth everyone is simply a 'French citizen' without distinction of titles or armorial insignia. In tone the decree echoes Sieyès's uncompromising egalitarian hostility towards noble privilege.

### 2.5.1 Imagery of the Declaration

The decree on the abolition of nobility drew the line at damage to property, ownership of property having been proclaimed a natural right in the Declaration of the Rights of Man. (The decree is evidence that, as is known from other sources, the crowd was taking the law into its own hands by ransacking chateaux, destroying records of seigneurial dues, etc.)



Figure 1 French School, *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen*, 1789, oil on canvas, Musée Carnavalet, Paris. Photo: Giraudon/Bridgeman Art Library

### Exercise 5

Looking at Figure 1, what does the imagery of the Declaration of the Rights of Man appear to draw upon?

The basic form is biblical in inspiration: the well-known image of the two tablets of the law (the Ten Commandments) brought down by Moses from Mount Sinai. The implication is that the 17 rights of man parallel (or perhaps even supersede) the Judaeo-Christian decalogue. (In the preamble to the Declaration God is referred to as 'the Supreme Being', the divine creator of the universe postulated by Enlightenment deists.)

Other imagery is classical, drawn from motifs common in ancient republican Rome:

- the central pike (the weapon of the free citizen), surmounted by the Phrygian cap, or legendary red cap of liberty, associated with the freed slave;
- enveloping the pike, the *fasces* (upright sticks, bound together in a bundle, carried before the 'lictors' or senior magistrates and symbolising solidarity and civic virtue);
- garlands of oak leaves, symbolising victory.

Other symbols include a chain with a broken fetter, symbolising emancipation from bondage; an equilateral triangle, symbolising equality; and the all-seeing eye of Providence (a masonic symbol).

The revolutionaries thus drew on appropriate aspects of classical and religious imagery, familiar under the Old Regime, and adapted them to a new ideology after 1789.

## 2.6 Enlightenment, revolution and reform – the departments

Old Regime France was a confused welter of overlapping administrative, judicial and fiscal divisions and authorities (see Figure 2).



Figure 2 The French provinces, 1789. Photo: John Paxton, *Companion to the French Revolution*, Facts on File, New York and Oxford, 1988. Reproduced by permission of John



## Paxton

There were 83 new administrative units created in January 1790 by decree of the Assembly, most of which exist to this day. They were subdivided into districts, and these in turn into cantons and communes (or municipalities).

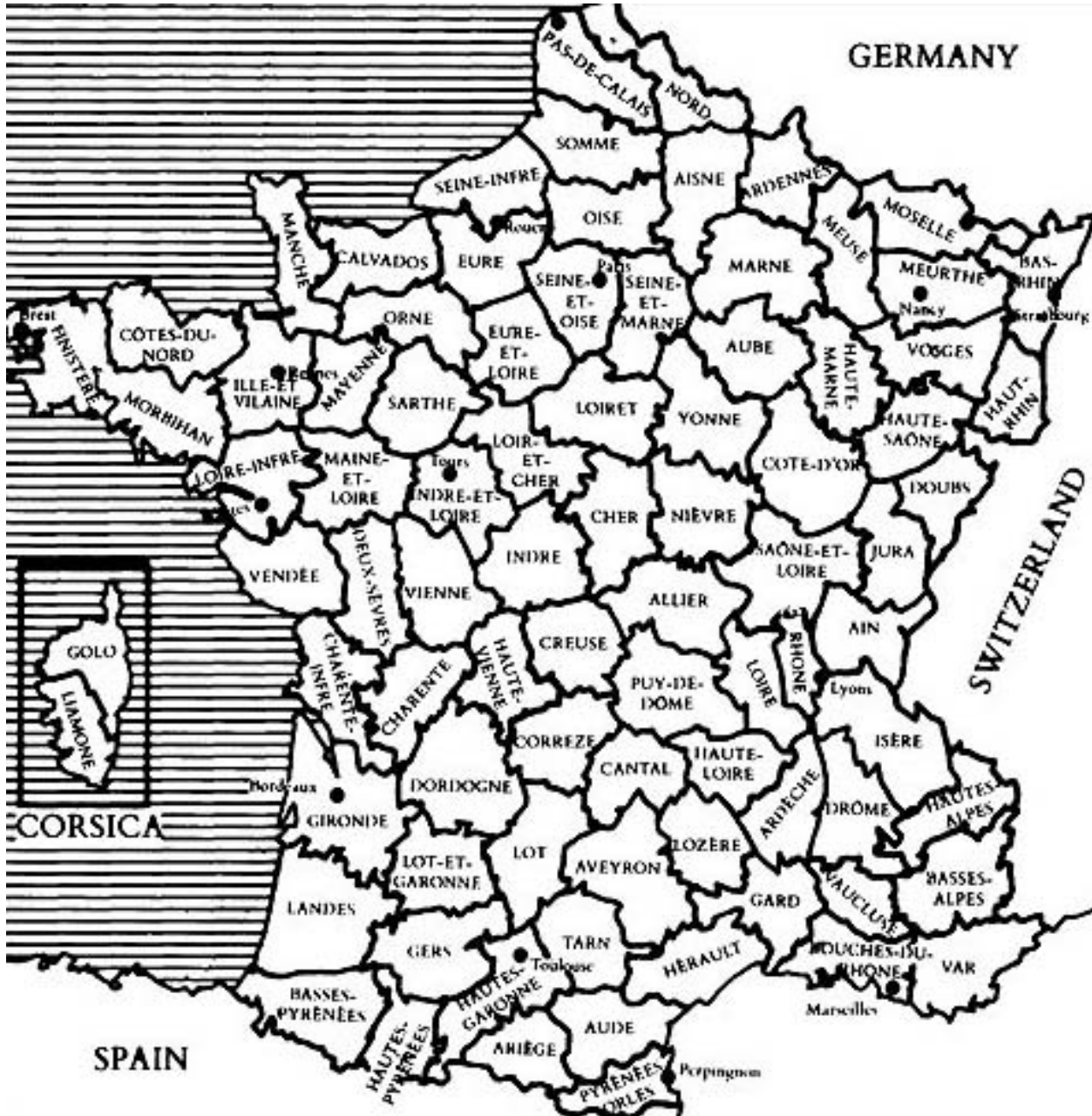


Figure 3 The departments of revolutionary France, 1790. Photo: Franklin L. Ford, *Europe 1780–1830*, 2nd edn, Longman, Harlow, 1989. Reprinted by permission of Pearson Education Limited

### Exercise 6

Look at Figure 3, a map showing the departments (*départements*). These were the 83 new administrative units created in January 1790 by decree of the Assembly. Compare

Figure 3 with Figure 2 (a map showing the 35 provinces of pre-revolutionary France). State what significant differences you notice. Give examples.

There are two main differences. First, the departments are of roughly equal size, in contrast to the haphazard former provinces, such as the Bourbonnais and Auvergne. Second, a department is usually named after a geographical feature, normally a river or mountain. For example, departments named after rivers include Gironde, Somme, Seine et Marne, Moselle, Upper and Lower Rhine (Haut-Rhin, Bas-Rhin). Departments named after mountains include the High, Low and Eastern Pyrenees (Hautes-Pyrénées, Basses-Pyrénées and Pyrénées Orientales), Vosges, Jura, Higher and Lower Alps (Hautes-Alpes, Basses-Alpes). The departments were established on the rational and scientific basis of equal size, and were named not after historical or traditional associations but in accordance with natural features.

Power was decentralised and allocated to elected constituencies. Administration was entrusted to officials elected by local taxpayers, to a general council in the department and to a mayor in each commune.

## 3 From 1789 to the flight to Varennes

### 3.1 The moderate reformers

1789–92 was a period of relatively moderate reform in the spirit of the Enlightenment – moderate, that is, compared with what followed. It was certainly revolutionary in relation to what went before. The Constituent Assembly (August 1789–September 1791) and its successor, the **Legislative Assembly** (October 1791–August 1792), comprising educated members of the Third Estate joined by liberal-minded nobles and clergy, were satisfied with the transformation of absolute monarchy into a parliamentary system, a constitutional monarchy under a constitution introduced in 1791. Political power lay with the Assembly, which was run by wealthy property-holders. Their object ‘was not to effect a social revolution but to create a more open society in which opportunities previously restricted to birth, should now be open to talent’ (Hampson, 1975, p. 95).

### 3.2 Popular violence and the Revolution

The deputies were concerned to protect property and maintain order (as the 1790 decree on the abolition of nobility suggests) in the face of a growing breakdown of public order; and their attitude to the masses – to what the demagogic journalist Jean-Paul Marat (1744–93) called *le petit peuple* (the little people), the millions of propertyless, distressed, violent and unpredictable ‘fellow citizens’ – was one of growing apprehension. The people traditionally rioted when bread was short, and increasingly they came out on the streets to take ‘direct action’ – that is, to take the law into their own hands – their expectations aroused by the sweeping changes taking place.

The masses were an ever-present threat to orderly reform. The leaders of the Paris crowd were political activists who called themselves **sans-culottes** (literally ‘without breeches’,

because they wore trousers rather than the knee-breeches or *culottes* associated with the upper classes –see Plate 1). The *sans-culottes* were from what may be called the lower middle class – to be distinguished from the idle and the unemployed. The ‘cream’ of the *sans-culottes* included artisans and tradesmen, master craftsmen and small shop-keepers, but their followers were hired labourers, porters, waiters, janitors and barbers. Through demonstrations and street violence the *sans-culottes* forced events faster and further than the current leaders of opinion desired.

Click to view Plate 1: Louis-Léopold Boilly, *The Actor Chenard as a ‘Sans-Culotte’* 1792, oil on panel, 33.5 x 22.5 cm, Musée de la Ville de Paris, Musée Carnavelet, Paris. Photo: Giraudon/Bridgeman Art Library.

A nationwide panic or ‘Great Fear’ accompanied the Assembly's decrees of August 1789 abolishing feudalism and privilege in France. The king, unhappy at his new, diminished role and at being required to assent to so many revolutionary measures, and encouraged by his family and royalist supporters to resist, at first refused to promulgate the decrees of 4 August and the Declaration of the Rights of Man. ‘I will never allow *my* clergy and *my* nobility to be stripped of their assets’, he declared (quoted in Vovelle, 1984, p.114).

In October, when the king's personal guards at Versailles were seen to trample on the tricolour, the National Guard reacted, caught up in a revived fear that Louis might attempt to close the Assembly by force. A crowd of Parisian women, marching to the Assembly at Versailles to protest against rising bread prices, advanced on the royal palace. With the acquiescence and even cooperation of the National Guard, including Lafayette, they forced the royal family to return with them to Paris, where the king, virtually a prisoner in the Tuileries palace, now ignominiously assented to the decrees.

Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* became the bible across Europe of what was to become known as conservatism. From the first, Burke opposed the Revolution on principle. He deplored the sudden break with custom and tradition, and the implementation of change based on abstract principles (such as the rights of man) drawn from the Enlightenment. He abhorred the egalitarianism and lack of deference to nobility and monarchy, and the running amok of what he called ‘the swinish multitude’. He foresaw bloodshed.

The majority of the deputies, under Lafayette, were determined to preserve order and to keep power in the hands of the representatives of the responsible and the propertied. Branches of the National Guard were established across France. In December 1789 the Assembly drew a distinction between ‘active’ (that is, monied) and ‘passive’ (propertyless) citizens. Only the former were eligible to participate in the election of deputies. An electorate of four and a half million male taxpayers chose some 50,000 ‘electors’, who paid even higher tax and who in turn elected the deputies to the Assembly (and the candidates for public office). The deputies and office-holders themselves were qualified to stand by virtue of the still higher taxes which they paid. Even so, the electorate was far broader than any in the rest of Europe, where even these provisions seemed ‘madly democratic’ (Palmer, 1971, p. 70). The French radicals, however, pointed to the ‘aristocracy of the rich’ (a phrase coined by Marat), which was replacing the old feudal ‘aristocracy of birth’.

### 3.3 The divide over the Church, 1790

The revolutionaries of 1789 also aspired to reform the Catholic Church in France, though not to disestablish it, still less to de-Christianise the country. Many of the clergy

themselves favoured reform. In August 1789 the Assembly deprived the Church of its income by abolishing the tithe. In November it decreed the sequestration (nationalisation) of church lands, roughly 10 per cent of all land in France, for public sale. The Assembly was prompted by the same need to raise revenue to pay off the national debt which had led to the summoning of the Estates-General.

But the programme of church reform was also ideological, inspired by the rationalism and humanitarianism of the Enlightenment. In February 1790 the Assembly abolished the monastic orders and also proclaimed civic equality for Protestants. In July 1790 it introduced the **Civil Constitution of the Clergy**, which cut the number of Catholic bishoprics from 135 to 83, allocating one diocese for each department, and made provision for a salaried clergy appointed by popular election. These startling changes were introduced by the Assembly without consulting the Catholic Church.

A deep and lasting break between Catholic opinion and the Revolution came in November 1790, when the Assembly forced the issue by requiring the clergy to swear allegiance to the constitution (including the Civil Constitution of the Clergy). Almost half the ordinary clergy refused to take the oath, and only seven bishops assented, while the Pope denounced the Civil Constitution (and by implication the Revolution) in April 1791. The clergy who refused to take the oath (known as **non-jurors**) were imprisoned or went into exile – 30,000 priests had left France by 1799 – swelling the ranks of the émigrés and turning tensions between church and state into an ideological divide between supporters and enemies of the Revolution.

A published protest by a former deputy of the nobility to the Estates-General shows how divisive the issue of the oath could be. Marat's *L'Ami du peuple* from December 1790 provides evidence of the mounting extremism threatening the moderates.

## 3.4 Monarchy and the Revolution – the flight to Varennes, 1791

The task of the moderates was further complicated by the ambiguous attitude of the royal family. From the first there were royalists who refused to compromise with the Revolution, including Louis XVI's younger brothers, the comte de Provence (later Louis XVIII) and the comte d'Artois (later Charles X), who left France as émigrés and fomented counter-revolution from abroad. By 1791 half the noble officers in the French army had resigned their commissions. Weak, shifty and out of his depth, Louis XVI remained suspicious of the Revolution and hostile to the constitution. As a practising Catholic, he was profoundly disturbed by the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. Still more antagonistic was the queen, Marie-Antoinette, whose brother was the Habsburg emperor. Marie-Antoinette opposed any compromise with the Revolution. 'Only armed force', she wrote, 'can put things right' (Hampson, 1975, p. 98). In June 1791 the royal family attempted to flee to a place of safety on the eastern frontier of France, from where Louis, with the implicit threat of armed foreign assistance, proposed to renegotiate terms with the Assembly. They were caught at Varennes (the episode is known as the flight to Varennes) and were returned to Paris under guard. Once more they were virtually prisoners.

'The flight to Varennes opened up the second great schism of the Revolution' (Doyle, 2001, p. 47). The king's loyalty to the Revolution and his credibility as a constitutional monarch were fatally compromised. So was the cause of moderate, liberal constitutionalism in France. In July 1791 an anti-royalist demonstration took place in the Champ-de-Mars in Paris. It was put down by the National Guard under Lafayette, and some 50

demonstrators were killed. What later became known as the massacre of the Champ-de-Mars further polarised opinion.

For the moderates of 1789, the Revolution had gone far enough. Confidence in constitutional monarchy would be restored, they hoped, by the king's formal assent to the new constitution in September 1791. From the spring of 1792 onwards, however, the cause of moderation was under continual challenge: on the one hand, from the king's unreliability and the threat of foreign intervention and counter-revolution, and, on the other, from the *sans-culottes*, militant agitators and radical intellectuals in and outside the Assembly.

## 4 Europe and the French Revolution

### 4.1 Intellectual, governmental and monarchical responses

There was much sympathy among intellectuals abroad for the Revolution, which seemed to be putting so many Enlightenment ideals into practice. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant was among the first to hail the Revolution as a unique historical phenomenon, and these early reactions were shared by Fichte, Herder, Schiller and Goethe. Enthusiasts in Britain included the radical Thomas Paine, author of *The Rights of Man* (1791), Mary Wollstonecraft, author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), poets such as Burns, Blake, Coleridge and Wordsworth, and, initially, the campaigner against slavery William Wilberforce, a man of deep religious conviction. In later years Wordsworth recalled his emotions of 1789 in a celebrated couplet:

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,  
But to be young was very Heaven!

What was the attitude of the French revolutionaries to Europe? In May 1790 the Assembly resolved that 'the French nation renounces involvement in any war undertaken with the aim of making conquests' and that 'it will never use force against the liberty of any people' (Vovelle, 1984, p. 123). This was not, however, regarded as incompatible with wars of 'liberation' to spread the Revolution abroad. In the boast of the radical deputy Pierre Chaumette: 'The land which separates Paris from St Petersburg will soon be gallicized, municipalized, jacobinized' (quoted in Furet, 1996, p. 104).

How did the European monarchs react? A letter from Leopold II, Austrian emperor, to Catherine II, empress of Russia, in July 1791 and the Declaration of Pillnitz of August 1791, written immediately after the flight to Varennes, indicate the attitude to the Revolution of the monarchies of Austria and Prussia. Both were 'open' documents, intended to influence public opinion across France and Europe and to be understood as expressions of solidarity between the rulers of Austria and Prussia, speaking on behalf of European monarchs generally. In the letter to Catherine, Leopold expresses indignation at the treatment of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette and his fears for their safety. He sees in the 'dangerous excesses of the French Revolution' a threat to monarchs and political stability generally. The Revolution had thus become an international issue. The

Declaration of Pillnitz is an appeal for support by the Austrian and Prussian monarchs to the other European monarchs and a warning of possible military intervention in France. The rulers of Britain and continental Europe in 1792 were alarmed by the Revolution, but not so much that they took serious steps to suppress it. Kaunitz, the Austrian chancellor, indeed protested against intervening in France's internal affairs as unnecessary. Austria, Prussia and Russia acted in traditional fashion by taking advantage of the weakness to which they supposed the Revolution had brought France, in order to complete the partition of France's former protégé, Poland, swallowed up by Russia and Prussia in the partitions of 1793 and 1795.

It was the French who declared war. They were not to know how far Austria and Prussia were serious in their threats. What they did know was that in 1787 the Prussians had intervened militarily in Holland, while the Austrians in 1788 had sent their troops into the Austrian Netherlands (Belgium), in each case to suppress a revolutionary uprising. In April 1792 France declared war on the Habsburg ruler of Austria, Emperor Francis (Leopold's successor), and invaded the Austrian Netherlands (present-day Belgium). In November the Assembly decreed that France offered 'fraternal assistance to all peoples wishing to recover their liberty'. Once hostilities began, the Declaration of Brunswick (August 1792) issued by the Duke of Brunswick, commanding the Prussian and Austrian armies, threatened to put Paris to sword and fire should any harm befall the French royal family. War between France and European monarchs spread the Revolution beyond France's frontiers, and inspired an ulterior goal of securing for France the 'natural frontier' of the Rhine.

## 4.2 Political polarization and the fall of the monarchy

By 1792 the liberal constitutionalists of 1789, men like Lafayette, found themselves increasingly on the defensive. There was growing hostility to the National Assembly, with its limited franchise and 'aristocracy of the rich'. A fringe of radical deputies seated on the left of the Assembly (the political terms 'left' and 'right' date from this period) were supported in Paris and across France by numerous radical political organizations or 'clubs', notably a club calling itself the Society of the Friends of the Constitution (and later Society of the Friends of Liberty and Equality) – better known as the **Jacobin** club. Foremost among the Jacobin deputies in the Assembly was Maximilien de Robespierre (1758–94), a fervent disciple of Rousseau, who seemed to believe himself the embodiment of the 'general will' and republican virtue.

In September 1791 the National Assembly, after the two years which it had allotted itself to enact a constitution, duly dissolved itself, transferring its powers to a Legislative Assembly, from election to which, at Robespierre's suggestion, it quixotically barred its own members. There were thus no experienced deputies, and there was an influx of younger radical revolutionaries. Half the deputies were under 30.

Outside the Assembly, the pressure of the 'clubs' and the growing politicisation of the *sans-culottes* were accompanied by a torrent of publications released under the right to freedom of the press laid down in the Declaration of the Rights of Man. By 1791 there were 150 newspapers, including much inflammatory journalism, in which issues were personalised and political opponents were blackguarded. Notorious among these 'tabloids' of the day were Jacques Hébert's *Le Pere Duchesne (Old Man Duchesne)*, with a circulation running to 200,000, larded with foul invective, and Jean-Paul Marat's daily *L'Ami du peuple (The People's Friend)*, both of which continually incited the *sans-culottes* to violence. As early as 1789 Marat had declared: 'The political machine can only be

wound up by violence, just as the air can only be cleared by words' (Vovelle, 1984, p. 209). Objects of attack included the usual targets – aristocrats and priests and increasingly the royal family – and also extended to the 'active citizens' who supported and administered the new France – the authorities and members of the National Assembly.

In-fighting increased in the Assembly and radicalised it. By May 1792 the Assembly was falling under the influence of the Jacobins and other extreme factions such as the **Girondins**, who decreed the deportation of non-juring priests and the death sentence for counter-revolutionary émigrés. In June the Assembly called for a levy of 20,000 volunteers to defend Paris from its enemies at home and abroad. When the king vetoed the measure, the Girondins called for mass demonstrations outside the Tuileries. An armed crowd of *sans-culottes* broke into the palace and forced Louis to wear the red cap of liberty. On 10 August a body of *sans-culottes*, national guards and others sacked the Tuileries. The king's 600 Swiss guards, whom Louis ordered not to fire on the crowd, were massacred. The royal family took refuge in the Assembly, from where they were transferred, as prisoners, to a secure fortress in Paris. The cause of constitutional monarchy was drowned in violence and bloodshed.

### 4.3 Birth of the republic: war, civil war and terror

After the church and monarchy, 'war was the third great polarizing issue of the Revolution' (Doyle, 2001, p. 50). With a declaration by the Assembly in July 1792 of *la patrie en danger* (the fatherland in danger), Prussian troops on French soil in August, and the fall of the border fortress of Verdun in September, there was mass panic in Paris, with accusations of treachery against the king and queen, Lafayette (who fled abroad), 'aristocrats' and priests. In the 'September massacre', some 1,400 priests and suspected counter-revolutionaries were dragged from prison by rampaging *sans-culottes*, and together with common criminals and prostitutes were wantonly butchered. *Le Père Duchesne* egged on the perpetrators, while the minister of justice, Georges Danton (1759–94), did nothing. 'The French Revolution, anti-noble almost from the start, had also turned anti-clerical, anti-monarchical and (with the September massacres) terroristic' (Doyle, 1999, p. xv).

On 20 September 1792, under pressure from Robespierre and the Jacobins, the Legislative Assembly was replaced by a **National Convention**. (The term was taken from the Constitutional Convention which drew up the US Constitution in 1787.) The significance of this appeared two days later, when the Convention duly decreed the abolition of the monarchy and the creation of the French Republic with a new constitution. Theoretically, the legislature was now – for the first time in modern history – elected by universal male suffrage. In practice, only one-tenth of the electorate – the *sans-culottes* – ventured to vote.

In January 1793 Louis XVI was tried by the Convention for so-called crimes against the nation. Addressed by his surname ('citizen Capet') just like any other citizen, he was, by a narrow majority vote, sentenced to death. He was guillotined in what became the place de la Revolution (formerly place Louis XV, now place de la Concorde). Marie-Antoinette, long defamed as 'the Austrian bitch' on suspicion of scheming for Austria's interests, was guillotined in October. Again, the Revolution made a violent break with the French past and in doing so issued a defiant challenge to the rest of Europe. In Danton's words, 'France threw down its gauntlet to Europe, and that gauntlet was the head of a king' (quoted in Doyle, 1989, p. 4; Figure 4 shows, beneath the severed head of Louis XVI, the

words from the *Marseillaise*: 'Let impure blood water our furrows.' The caption reads: 'Monday 21 January 1793 at 10.15 a.m. on the place de la Revolution formerly called place Louis XV. The tyrant fell beneath the sword of the laws. This great act of justice appalled the aristocracy, destroyed the superstition of royalty, and created the republic. It stamps a great character on the National Convention and renders it worthy of the confidence of the French ...In vain did an audacious faction and some insidious orators exhaust all the resources of calumny, charlatanism and chicane; the courage of the republicans triumphed: the majority of the Convention remained unshakeable in its principles, and the genius of intrigue yielded to the genius of Liberty and the ascendancy of virtue. Extract from the 3rd letter of Maximilien Robespierre to his constituents' (trans. Lentin)).





Figure 4 Villeneuve, *Matière à réflexion pour les jongleurs couronnés* (*Matter for thought for crowned twisters*), 1793, engraving, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris

Attitudes became still more polarised. The Convention organized a determined resistance to foreign invasion, combined with action against those in France still loyal to the cause of monarchy. By 1793 France was not only at war with most of the European states, a war which continued until 1799, but also in a state of virtual civil war – and with intensified civil

war came mounting violence and extremism. Figure 5 shows the invasion points of the **First Coalition** against France (Austria, Prussia, Holland, Britain, Spain and the kingdom of Sardinia) and the locations of internal resistance to the Revolution in 1792–3. There were two key centres of long-term resistance: the royalist insurgents, known as the ‘Chouans’, of Normandy and Brittany, and a massive uprising in the Vendee south of the Loire in 1793.

From this time, until the enemies of France have been expelled from the territory of the Republic, all Frenchmen are in a state of permanent requisition for the army.

(Anthology I, p. 90)

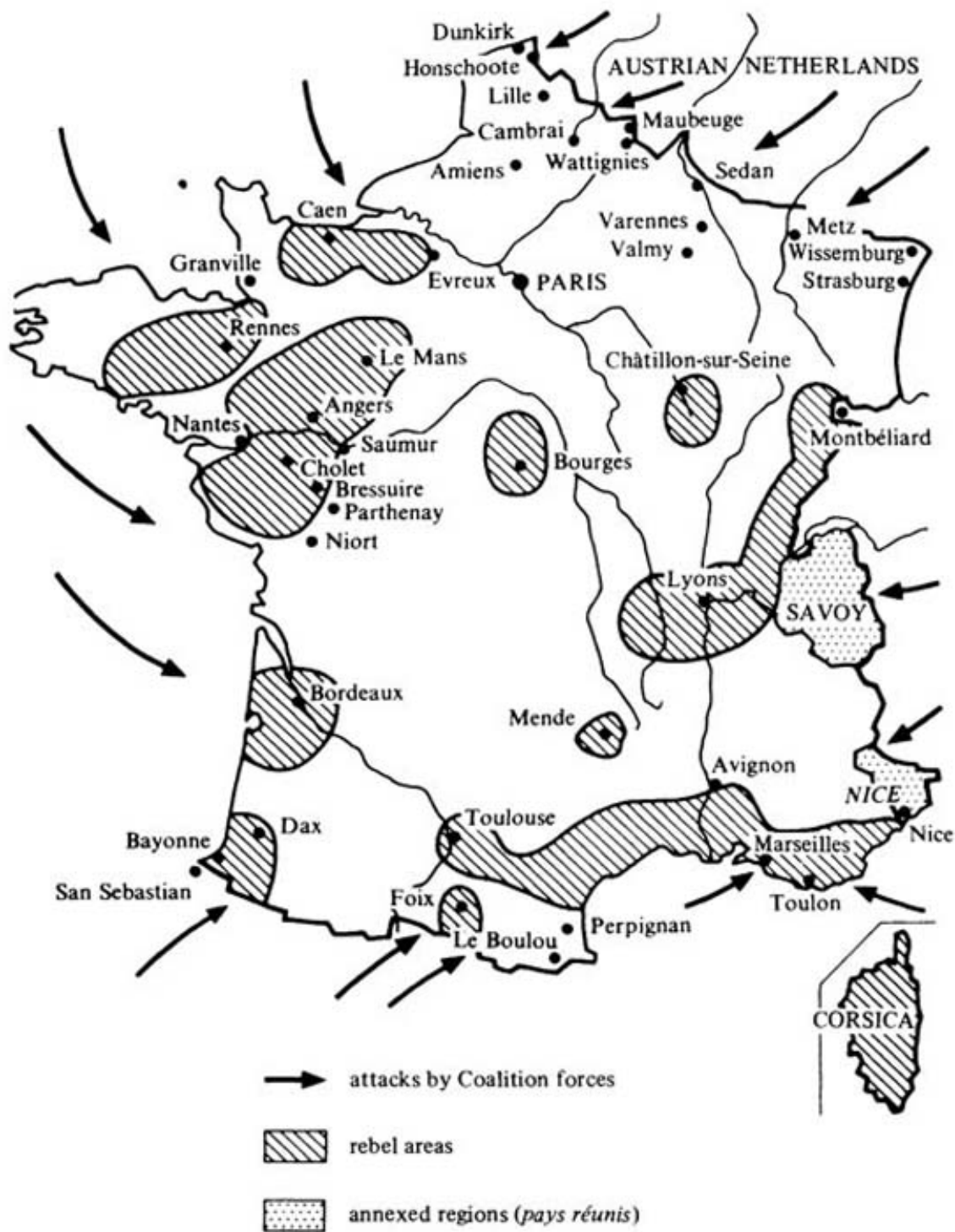


Figure 5 The republic under internal and external attack, 1793. Photo: Marc Bouloiseau, *The Jacobin Republic 1792–1794*, Cambridge University Press, 1983

So began the decree on the *Levée en masse* issued by the Convention in August 1793, a compulsory call-up of 750,000 men (all single men aged 18–25) and the harnessing of all human and material resources. It was in effect a ‘declaration of total war’ (Blanning, 2000, p. 253), which unleashed enthusiastic support from the forces of popular radicalism in Paris and elsewhere – notably the *sans-culottes* – and provoked armed resistance from

the forces of counter-revolution in the Vendee and around Bordeaux, Lyons and Marseilles. The Mediterranean port of Toulon, occupied by the British fleet, defected to the British. By August 1793, 60 departments, or three-quarters of the total, were declared to be in a state of rebellion.

The Girondins, who dominated the Convention from September 1792, were ousted in May 1793 by the Jacobins under Robespierre with the help of 80,000 armed *sans-culottes*. A further constitution was introduced in June 1793, more democratic than that of 1791, but it was suspended for the duration of the war. The twelve months from July 1793 to July 1794 were known as the period of war government, revolutionary government, or simply **the Terror**. Real power was vested in a so-called **Committee of Public Safety**, in effect a war cabinet of 12 members of the Convention. The Committee took direct charge of mobilising France's material and human resources, fixing wages and prices, calling up and provisioning the army – and eradicating internal opposition.

## 4.4 The guillotine

The new system of departments introduced in 1790 removed the many differing and often overlapping jurisdictions of Old Regime France and replaced them with a uniform system of justice. Each department had its own criminal court, each district a civil court. All criminal cases were to be tried by jury, another revolutionary innovation. Enlightenment thinkers including Montesquieu and Voltaire had criticized the arbitrariness and brutality of penal practice in Old Regime France. Judicial torture as a means of exacting evidence in criminal proceedings and torture in general – notably the horrific penalty of breaking on the wheel (suffered in 1762 by the innocent Jean Calas, whose cause had been taken up by Voltaire) – were abolished in October 1789. There remained the question of capital punishment itself. The Legislative Assembly resolved by a narrow majority to retain the death penalty and adopted the guillotine as the instrument of execution, following a report from Dr Louis, secretary of the Academy of Surgeons and author of the article 'Death' in the *Encyclopédie*.

Click to view *The Decree on the death penalty*.

### Exercise 7

Now read the decree concerning the death penalty, March 1792 (Anthology I, p.87–9). Why did the Assembly approve the guillotine?

The guillotine was adopted on expert advice and after experimentation on scientific and humanitarian grounds: as the quickest and least painful form of execution for victim, spectators and executioner alike ('humanity requires that the death penalty be as painless as possible'). It applied the fundamental principle of mechanics: Newton's law of gravitation. Newton's law was infallible, and so was the guillotine: the falling bevelled blade never failed to decapitate and there would be no more botched executions.

The adoption of the guillotine was another example of legal and social equality in action. Nobleman and common murderer suffered the same penalty, and both were executed publicly. The king and queen were guillotined in the year after this decree. The guillotine was named after Dr Guillotin, a member of the Constituent Assembly, who enthused over

the instrument as a symbol of the penal, technological and humanitarian progress inspired by the Enlightenment.

## 4.5 The *sans-culotte* as revolutionary hero

Revolutionary symbolism (which we noted earlier with reference to the Declaration of the Rights of Man) extended to clothing: the wearing of the tricolour cockade was made compulsory for men by a decree of July 1792. The red 'cap of liberty' became the normal headgear of the *sans-culottes*, now officially idealized as heroes of the people.

Plate 1 shows an actor dressed as a *sans-culotte*, carrying the tricolour banner (on which is emblazoned the slogan liberty or death') at the 'festival of liberty' in Savoy in October 1792. (Savoy had just been annexed to France.) The pole supporting the banner may be intended to suggest a pike, a weapon associated with the *sans-culottes*.

Robespierre called it a 'sacred weapon' (Vovelle, 1984, p.218).

Click to view Boilly's portrait of the *sans-culottes*.

### Exercise 8

What other signs can you detect in Boilly's portrait of the *sans-culotte* (Plate 1) that differentiate him from an aristocratic hero?

- Trousers instead of knee-breeches (*culottes* - the term *sans-culottes* was originally used contemptuously by the nobility).
- Sabots, or wooden clogs, rather than buckled leather shoes.
- Natural hair instead of powdered wig.
- Tricolour cockade on the red 'cap of liberty'.
- Pipe stuck in mouth rather than, say, aristocratic snuff box.
- Short jacket (*la carmagnole*, also the title of a revolutionary song), rolled up sleeves, bare hands and forearms, open shirt and loose scarf: this is the hardy mountaineer (see the Savoy background) as opposed to the aristocratic fop with gloves and cravat.

The article 'What is a *sans-culotte*?' , published in 1793, was a kind of Jacobin counterpart to Sieyès's *What is the Third Estate*?

Embodiment of the common man, the *sans-culotte* was held out in Jacobin ideology as the hero of the Revolution, the personification of 'liberty, equality and fraternity', the 'general will' and republican virtue. As an egalitarian, the *sans-culotte* made a point of addressing everyone, including deputies and officials, as *citoyen* (citizen – anyone saying *monsieur* or *madame* was liable to fall foul of the Law of Suspects, 1793), and of using the familiar second-person singular – *tu* – not the polite form – *vous*.

The *sans-culotte* was an avowed political activist and militant. His duty, as defender of the Revolution, was to maintain an atmosphere of constant vigilance and suspicion, and if necessary to resort to violence and terror. The *sans-culottes* were championed by Marat in *L'Ami du peuple* and by Hébert, who urged in *Le Père Duchesne*: 'To your pikes, good *sans-culottes*! Sharpen them up to exterminate the aristocrats' (Vovelle, 1984, p. 219). It was the *sans-culottes* who attended the revolutionary watch committees (they made up some three-quarters of the personnel, Rudé, 1966, p.150). Though often barely literate

(Williams, 1989, p.30), they issued (or refused) certificates of good citizenship (*certificats de civisme*) to distinguish good citizens (revolutionaries) from 'enemies of the people'.

The *sans-culottes* were associated by their enemies with the street-mob excesses of the Revolution: the heads on pikes, the stringings-up on lamp-posts, the September massacres, the castration by frenzied women rioters of the corpses of the Swiss guards, the *tricoteuses* (women knitting around the guillotine as the heads rolled). It was poetic justice that, of those who had egged on the *sans-culottes*, Marat was assassinated by Charlotte Corday in 1793 (his death became the subject of a hagiographic picture by Jacques-Louis David – see Plate 2), while Hebert fell foul of Robespierre and was guillotined in 1794.

Click to view Plate 2: Jacques-Louis David, The Death of Marat 1793, oil on canvas, 160.7 x 124.8cm, Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels. Photo: Giraudon/Bridgeman Art Library.

## 4.6 The Terror in action

The year of authorised state terror from July 1793 to July 1794 was 'the climactic year of the Revolution' (Palmer, 1971, p. 113). Under the Committee of Public Safety, now including Robespierre, 'revolutionary tribunals', backed in every commune by a 'revolutionary committee' or 'watch committee' (*comité de surveillance*), were set up throughout France, staffed by members of the local Jacobin clubs and the *sans-culottes* to root out counter-revolutionaries, real and supposed. Deputies of the Convention were sent into the provinces as 'representatives on mission' to enforce the orders and reassert the control by the central government which had been devolved when the departments were created in 1790. The 'rights of man' were suspended. Anyone seeking public employment had to apply to the watch committee for a *certificat de civisme* as proof of ideological soundness. Possession of a certificate became virtually mandatory under the Law of Suspects of September 1793, which authorized indefinite imprisonment without trial. It is reckoned that half a million men and women were detained under it (Jones, 1988, p. 115).

A decree of June 1794 introduced by Robespierre declared that 'the tribunal is instituted to punish the enemies of the people' (Furet, 1996, p. 146). The Law of Suspects defined 'enemies of the people' under a catch-all description as those who showed themselves to be 'partisans of tyranny ... and enemies of liberty'. Suspects were accused, tried and executed in batches. There was no appeal against sentence. The accused were deprived of the right to be defended by counsel and to call witnesses. To be accused was as good as to be condemned; conviction rates rose from 30 per cent to 70 per cent, and the Revolution began to devour its own – men who had played a leading part in events since 1789, particularly the Girondins. Jacobins such as Danton and Camille Desmoulins (1760–94), who tried to stem the tide of terror, were themselves denounced by Robespierre and condemned to death.

Between September 1793 and July 1794 perhaps 17,000 people were sentenced to death by revolutionary tribunals and executed, three-quarters for alleged counter-revolution. 85 per cent of those guillotined were commoners rather than nobles – Robespierre denounced 'the bourgeoisie' in June 1793 – but in proportion to their number, nobles and clergy suffered most. Some 1,200 nobles were executed. Among the last victims of the Terror were the celebrated chemist Antoine Lavoisier (1743–94) and the poet André Chénier (1762–94). The Enlightenment philosopher Condorcet (1743–94), who laid the foundations of a system of universal education decreed in 1793, and who proclaimed his

faith in humanity's future in an eloquent *Sketch on ... the Progress of the Human Mind* (1793), committed suicide while awaiting execution. Including 10–12,000 summary executions without trial, especially in western France, and another 10–12,000 deaths in prison among those detained for revolutionary offences, a total of around 35–40,000 seems a likely toll of those who perished under the Terror (Bouloiseau, 1983, pp. 210–11; Jones, 1988, p. 115). The farewell letters of Olympe de Gouges and Amable Clement attest to the indiscriminate savagery of the Terror. (There is a presumption in favour of the truth of 'deathbed' statements.) The victims protest their innocence, patriotism and loyalty to the principles of 1789.

Robespierre was foremost in whipping up passions for a campaign of extermination against counter-revolution. In Paris 1,376 people were guillotined in seven weeks in June and July 1794 – the so-called 'Great Terror' – more than in the preceding 15 months. In Lyons there were mass executions by firing-squad because the guillotine was considered too slow (taking around two minutes per victim). In the Vendee region the 'representative on mission' authorized mass drownings in the River Loire and a decree was implemented ordering nothing less than 'the destruction of the Vendee' (Furet, 1996, p. 139). Rebellious Marseilles and Lyons were renamed respectively 'City-without-name' and 'Liberated City' (*ville-affranchie*).

François Furet sees the Terror as more than the suppression of political opposition by the Jacobin elite in power: the final 'Great Terror' was unleashed when it was already clear that the Revolution was emerging victorious against its internal and foreign enemies. The Terror, Furet argues, was part of a revolutionary philosophy, ultimately inspired by the Enlightenment. Its followers not only believed in the perfectibility of man and the regeneration of society on new lines, but in that cause and in the name of 'the people' also believed themselves justified in 'extirpating' through 'terror' all who stood in the way of that vision. Mme Roland, wife of the Girondin leader, and, like him, a victim of the Terror, exclaimed from the scaffold: 'O Liberty, what crimes are committed in your name!' (*Grand Dictionnaire Encyclopédique Larousse*, 1985, p. 284).

## 5 Enlightenment, universalism and revolution

### 5.1 Revolutionary calendar and metric system

We considered earlier the universalist principles of 1789 deriving from the Enlightenment that inspired the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the redivision of France into departments. As the dominant group in the Convention by 1793, the Jacobins regarded themselves as mandated to enact the 'general will' of the people in a sense inspired by Rousseau: not as the aggregate weight of the individual aspirations of 28 million Frenchmen, but as the expression of that which, as virtuous men and citizens, Frenchmen *ought* to want. Always confident of their own understanding of the 'general will', the Jacobins aimed to shape public consciousness and to propel it in given directions through art and the media. At the lowest level came the distribution to the army of *Le Père Duchesne* to stimulate the fighting men's revolutionary ardour.

The Jacobins revolutionised time itself. In October 1793 the Convention decreed the introduction of the revolutionary calendar based on a 10-day week (and originally even a 10-hour day) and a year of 12 months of equal length (30 days each, to which extra days were added at the end of the year).

### Exercise 9

Examine Plate 3 headed *Calendrier pour l'an III de la République Française* (Calendar for year III of the French Republic). Why do you suppose 1795 became 'year III'?

The Convention sought to mark a clean break with the past by establishing a new revolutionary, *republican* era to replace the traditional Christian era. The use of Roman numerals also suggested a classical, pre-Christian epoch.

Click to view Plate 3: Calendar for Year III of the French Republic, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

The new calendar was introduced in 1793 after the replacement of the monarchy by the republic. The year 1792 was retrospectively renamed 'year I' to mark a new era in the evolution of mankind dating from the establishment of the republic, and the year began on 22 September, the date of the founding of the republic. Dates before 1792 – including 1789 itself – were expressed as, for example, 'the year 1789 of the Old Regime (*ancien régime*)'. To a deputy who argued that year I should be 1789 rather than 1792, another deputy replied, to applause: 'We have been free only since we have no longer had a king' (Furet, 1996, p. 117). The cult of the republic, as Hampson puts it, was becoming 'something of a religion in its own right' (1981, p. 20).

Names for the new months were invented to correspond with natural phenomena, climatic and agricultural. Autumn consisted of the months *Vendémiaire*, *Brumaire* and *Frimaire*, to signify respectively harvest, mist and cold. The winter months were named *Nivôse*, *Pluviôse* and *Ventôse*, months of snow, rain and wind. The three spring months signified seed time, flowering time and meadow – *Germinal*, *Floréal* and *Prairial* – followed by the summer months of *Messidor*, *Thermidor* and *Fructidor*, or summer harvest, heat and summer fruit. Britons scorned the revolutionary calendar. A satirical contemporary translation ran: Slippy, Nippy, Drippy; Freezy, Wheezy, Sneezzy; Showery, Flowery, Bowery; Heaty, Wheaty, Sweety (Doyle, 2001, pp. 116–17). The calendar was intended to be universal, but the names of the new months were inappropriate for the southern hemisphere, which is cold during the 'hot' month of *Thermidor*.

The new calendar lasted until 1806. The 10-hour day was particularly short-lived. The 10-day week, with a rest day occurring only on the tenth day (*Décadi*) instead of on the seventh, was not popular! Nor was the renaming of the weekdays popular (*Primidi*, *Duodi*, *Tridi*, i.e. first day, second day, third day), or the replacement of saints' days by days named after agricultural and botanical terms (25 November, St Catherine's day, became the day of the pig).

What characterises these defiantly utopian reforms is the radical break with the past, the application of natural, mathematical and universal principles that would (in the words of the poet Fabre d'Eglantine, who devised the names of the months) 'enlighten the entire human race' (Kennedy, 1989, p. 348). Similar thinking lay behind the metric system of weights and measures, introduced by decree in 1795, with its divisions and subdivisions into units of ten. It was intended to replace the multiplicity of weights and measures current in Old Regime France, about which complaints were common in the *cahiers de*



*doléances* of 1789, and to be based on concepts of universal, albeit Franco-centric, validity. The arc of the meridian from the North Pole to the equator, measured at the Paris Observatory, became the basis of the metre. Area and volume were fixed by squaring and cubing the metre, and weight was calculated in units of a cubic decimetre of water.

Like the new calendar, the metric system was hailed by one member of the Convention as a 'benefit to humanity ... worthy of the Great Nation (*Grande Nation*) to whom it belongs and of other civilised people, who are also probably destined to adopt it sooner or later' (Kennedy, 1989, p. 79). The metric system was indeed spread by the revolutionary armies across most of continental Europe, where it has become standard.

## 5.2 The cult of the Revolution

With the suppression of aristocrats, royalists and counter-revolutionary priests came a cultural revolution against symbols and monuments of the Old Regime, the monarchy and the Catholic Church (see Figure 6, below). Freedom of religion was decreed in 1793. The Abbey of St Denis outside Paris, burial place of the French kings since the sixth century, was despoiled of its corpses. The bodies of Henri IV, Louis XIV, Louis XV and others were tossed into a common grave. Royal statues and emblems were demolished or 'vandalized' (the word was invented in 1794). Such deliberate destruction and desecration suggest, again, a desire literally to root out the past and begin again.



Figure 6 Joseph Chinard, *La Raison sous les traits d'Apollon foulant aux pieds la Superstition* (*Reason, in the person of Apollo, trampling Superstition underfoot*), 1791, terracotta model, 51.5 x 13.3 x 12 cm, Louvre, Paris. Photo: © RMN/C.Jean

Joseph Chinard's *La Raison sous les traits d'Apollon foulant aux pieds la Superstition* (*Reason, in the person of Apollo, trampling Superstition underfoot*) (Figure 6) depicts Apollo, the sun god, the rays of the sun streaming from his head, striding across a cloud bearing a torch. Superstition, in a nun's habit and veiled, is unable to see the true light. Superstition holds two sacred emblems of Christianity, the cross and the chalice. Chinard, who was then at the French Academy (of art) in Rome, was for a time imprisoned by the papal authorities,

almost certainly because of his blasphemous treatment of Christian emblems. (I am grateful for this information to Dr Linda Walsh.)

Most churches were closed down, the *sans-culottes* making sure of that. Place names were changed. The town of St-Pierre-le-Moutier (St Peter's Monastery) became Brutus-le-Magnanime (Brutus the Magnanimous). Montmartre became Mont Marat. Around 1,400 Paris streets were renamed: the rue des vierges (virgins' street) becoming the rue Voltaire and the île Saint-Louis changed to the île de la Fraternité. There was a rue de la Liberté and a rue de l'égalité. Even Christian names, strictly so-called, were discouraged in favour of the names of heroes of republican Rome or precursors of the Revolution: Jean-Jacques (after Rousseau) rather than Joseph. Men christened Louis tended to change their name.

Alternatives to Roman Catholicism were encouraged by the institution of revolutionary public 'festivals' with their own symbolism replacing Christian festivals and saints' days. The revolutionaries, like the thinkers of the Enlightenment, even if they believed in God, were mostly doubtful about the reality of an afterlife, and they felt the need for a secular alternative that would glorify the names of those who had contributed to the progress of humanity by immortalizing them in the nation's collective memory. Diderot had written that posterity was for the *philosophe* what heaven was for the believer. This was applied literally in 1791 when the church of Sainte-Genevieve in Paris became the Pantheon (temple of all the gods), rededicated as a final resting place for the 'great men' of the nation. The inscription on the portico reads: *Aux grands hommes la patrie reconnaissante* (to its great men – the grateful fatherland). Here the remains of Voltaire – whose name personified the Enlightenment as none other – were ceremonially reburied in July 1791 in a festival decorated with floats designed by the artist Jacques-Louis David and accompanied by brass and massed choirs singing the anthem *Peuple, éveille-toi!* (*People, awake!*) under the direction of its composer, François-Joseph Gossec. In October 1794 the remains of Rousseau were likewise transferred to the Pantheon with similar pomp. Thus while Louis XVI was decapitated and the bodies of his Bourbon ancestors were wantonly desecrated, those of the two best-known figures of the Enlightenment were reconsecrated as hallowed relics of the prophets of the Revolution. In November 1793 the metropolitan cathedral of Notre Dame was rededicated as the Temple of Reason.

In May 1794 the Convention passed a decree introducing the cult of the Supreme Being. This represented the triumph of the deist trend of the Enlightenment. Men might be sceptical of a particularist, sectarian concept of a Christian god, but that did not necessarily lessen faith in the Supreme Being of a natural religion. The climax came in June 1794 with the Festival of the Supreme Being, publicly celebrated by Robespierre.

The example of Paris was swiftly followed throughout France. On 19 December 1793, within six weeks of the rededication of Notre Dame in Paris, the commune of Aubenas in the department of the Ardeche held its own festival to celebrate 'the precious benefits of the Revolution and the abolition of the abuses of a hateful regime, remembered only with horror' (Charay, 1990, p.195; trans. Lentin). It was also agreed that 'in order to immortalize the memory of Marat, the friend of the people, there will be an apotheosis' (the granting of divine or elevated status) 'on the day of the Festival of Reason, in honour of the martyr of liberty' (Charay, 1990, p.195). Marat too was buried in the Pantheon.

In 1795 the Catholic Church in France as reorganized under the Civil Constitution was formally separated from the state by decree of the Convention. The episode of de-Christianization was not long-lived, but it was significant of the utopianism which inspired

many revolutionaries and which derived ultimately from the Enlightenment. In particular, this utopianism came from Rousseau: a belief in 'regenerated man', 'the people' and 'humanity', a return to the supposed virtues of Sparta or republican Rome (see Figure 7). It was accompanied by the ritual demonization of royalists, nobles and priests as 'enemies of the people'.



Figure 7 Jacques-Louis Pérée, *Regenerated Man Gives Thanks to the Supreme Being*, 1794–5, 41.5 x 29 cm, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. *With one hand he holds up the Rights of Man; in the other he wields a mattock. Beneath his feet lies the axed tree of the Old Regime, the debris of aristocratic privilege and luxury. A shaft of lightning sears a crown*

Ideas of regeneration and reconstruction received further impetus during the Revolutionary Wars, in which, for example, the city of Lille near the Belgian frontier was damaged. Plans for rebuilding drew on the cult of the Revolution, on Rousseau, and on

republican ideals with their strong classical associations. These ideals were eloquently expressed by Robespierre in his speech to the Convention of 5 February 1794 (Anthology I, pp. 98–9):

Now what is the fundamental principle of democratic or popular government, that is to say, the essential force that maintains and inspires it? It is virtue: I am speaking of public virtue, which brought about so many wonders in Greece and Rome, and which must produce even more astounding ones in republican France.

For an example of the reinterpretation of republican ideals in architecture, see Plate 4 (Verly's design for a public bath and theatre in Lille). This design recalls the public buildings and monuments of ancient Rome (baths and theatre, obelisks, equestrian statues). The Roman republic was central to the concept of a modern republic of free and equal citizens inspired by 'public virtue'. The design is severely classical: symmetrical with arches and columns. (For other classically inspired republican symbols see Plates 4 and 5.)

Click to view Plate 4: François Verly, *view of the proposed public bath and theatre in Lille*, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lille. Photo: © RMN/Quecq d'Henripret.

Click to view Plate 5: Quatremère, *group with la Patrie in the centre* for the eastern nave of the Pantheon, 1793, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

Click to view Plate 6: Joseph Chinard, bas-relief for the city hall in Lyon, 6.4 x 5.4 x 3 cm, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon. Photo: © Studio Basset.

## 5.3 The *Marseillaise*

During the Revolutionary Wars, as Robespierre insisted, 'republican enthusiasm must be exalted by all means possible'. The Jacobins encouraged a revolutionary solidarity and patriotism, expressed in the slogan 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity'. The *Marseillaise* began as the 'battle-hymn of the army of the Rhine', composed by Rouget de Lisle in April 1792 immediately after France declared war on Francis of Austria. It acquired its name when a battalion of volunteers from Marseilles reached Paris in July 1792. It became the anthem of the Revolution, and the national anthem by a decree of the Convention in 1795. A choral version with orchestral accompaniment by Gossec was performed at the Paris Opera 130 times between 1792 and 1799 (Hemmings, 1987, p. 51). You will almost certainly be familiar with its tune. (You can hear a few bars from it in the audio clips towards the end of this free course on *Britain and the French Revolution*.) It is lively and rousing, magnificently evocative, as Simon Schama says, of 'the comradeship of citizens in arms' (Schama, 1989, p. 598). What about the words?

Click to view The lyrics of the *Marseillaise*.

### Exercise 10

Read the words of the *Marseillaise*. How would you characterise them?

The words are an aggressive and sanguinary demonisation of the enemy (in 1792 the Austrians) as tyrannous and cruel.

In the dynastic wars of the Old Regime, bloody as they were, monarchs did not normally encourage personal hatred of the enemy. The Revolutionary Wars were embittered by ideological zeal. By 'traitors' and 'conspiring kings', the author had in mind Louis XVI and his émigré supporters as well as counter-revolutionary monarchs abroad. At the same time, the words were general enough to serve for France's various enemies throughout the Revolutionary Wars, and the 'impure blood' of the invaders was identified (in Figure 4) with the blood of the executed Louis XVI.



Figure 4 Villeneuve, *Matière à réflexion pour les jongleurs couronnées* (Matter for thought for crowned twisters), 1793, engraving, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. Beneath the severed head of Louis XVI are the words from the Marseillaise

The proclamation of 1792 to people of Belgium contains the same language of incitement. The Belgians are invited to defect to France in the cause of liberation from tyranny (the Habsburg emperor).

## 6 The Thermidorian Settlement and the end of the Revolution

In *Thermidor* (July) 1794 there was a further political coup, this time engineered by deputies in the Convention who felt that Jacobin fanaticism, mob violence and bloodshed had got wildly out of hand and feared for their own lives. They succeeded in outmanoeuvring Robespierre, who was arrested and (after a botched suicide attempt) guillotined together with over 100 other Jacobins. The Thermidorians then put a stop to show trials and bloodletting. They also called in the army to put down the *sans-culottes*: 'for the first time since 1789 the authorities felt they could rely on soldiers to restore domestic order' (Doyle, 2001, p. 59). When the Paris *sans-culottes* twice took to the streets in 1795, they were ruthlessly suppressed. The slaughter continued in a so-called White Terror (so-called from the white flag of the Bourbons) by counter-revolutionaries in Lyons, Nîmes and Marseilles avenging themselves on their former persecutors.

Yet another constitution was introduced in 1795 which dismantled the dictatorship of the Terror and established a ruling executive committee, or **Directory**, of five and a bicameral legislature consisting of a **Council of 500** and an upper house, or **Council of Elders** or '**Ancients**'. Eligibility for public office was restricted to some 30,000 men of property. Francois Boissy d'Anglas (1756–1826), who drew up the constitution, equated 'a country ruled by property-owners' with rule by 'the best ... those with most education', concerned with law and order (Hampson, 1969, p. 118). The franchise of four and a half million male taxpayers was nonetheless still the widest in Europe.

In the words of Richard Cobb, 1795 was 'the decisive year of the whole revolutionary period, for it was basically the Thermidorian Settlement that survived into the *Restauration*' [Bourbon restoration of 1815] (Cobb, 1970, p. 197). The main beneficiaries of the Revolution were in a broad sense bourgeois, but they were a landowning bourgeoisie, who had bought up land made available by the sequestration of church property, not an entrepreneurial bourgeoisie. The Revolution was disastrous to trade and industry, and a mercantile and industrial bourgeoisie did not come into its own in France before the 1830s. Men of means who qualified for the franchise – that is 'property-owners' and 'those with most education' – included members of the nobility, who re-emerged after Thermidor. The men of 1789 included nobles who had joined with the Third Estate and willingly jettisoned their privileges, and while events after 1789 had driven many nobles abroad, the émigrés constituted no more than 7 to 8 per cent of the French nobility. Most nobles remained, survived the Terror, participated in and even benefited from the Revolution – for example, as generals during the Revolutionary Wars. By the turn of the century, 'most of the wealthiest landowners in France were still the nobles of the Old Regime' (Blanning, 1987, p. 55).

The energies of the French people as a whole were directed into spreading the Revolution abroad. As Gwynne Lewis puts it: 'after 1795, the French Revolution continued, but wearing a military uniform and without the active support of 'the masses' (Lewis, 1993, p. 52). In so far as 'the masses' were identified with the excesses of the *sans-culottes*, the ruling classes were glad to see them put in their place.

In 1799 a fresh constitution entrusted supreme power to one of the successful generals who had been spreading the Revolution by military conquest in the neighbouring states: Napoleon Bonaparte. The author of this latest constitution was the abbé Sieyès, whom we met ten years earlier at the summoning of the Estates-General as the champion of the



Third Estate. All that seemed a world away now, so much had happened in the meantime. Sieyès was asked, what did you do during the Revolution? 'I survived,' he replied (Caratini, 1988, p. 507). What the propertied governing class in France desired now was to enjoy the gains which the Revolution had brought them and to keep them safe from the mob at home, from counter-revolution abroad, and from the possibility of a restoration of the Old Regime. Bonaparte would guarantee the new order in France and spread the Revolution abroad, incidentally securing France's 'natural frontier' on the Rhine. With Bonaparte's help – a 'whiff of grape-shot' – the lower chamber, which had royalist leanings, was dispersed in October 1795. In a *coup d'état* on 18 Brumaire (9 November) 1799, the upper chamber surrendered power to three 'consuls', the first of whom was Bonaparte. On 15 December Bonaparte issued a proclamation claiming that 'the Revolution is established on the principles with which it began. It is over' (Tulard, 1987, p. 498).

## 7 Conclusion

### 7.1 The Enlightenment, the French Revolution, Britain and Europe

Je suis tombé par terre,  
C'est la faute à Voltaire;  
Le nez dans le ruisseau,  
C'est la faute à Rousseau  
[I've tumbled to the ground  
thanks to Voltaire;  
With my nose in the brook,  
thanks to Rousseau]

(Quoted in Hugo, n.d., pp.204–5; trans. Lentin)

So ran a ditty popular after the Revolution, which blamed it on Voltaire and Rousseau. The idea was common among those hostile to the Revolution, including Catherine the Great. But the idea was also long shared by historians that the Revolution took place *as a result of the writings of the philosophes*, who, it is said, undermined confidence in the institutions of the Old Regime and paved the way for its overthrow.

#### Exercise 11

The nature of the relationship between the Enlightenment and the Revolution remains a complex and controversial question. Without going into it in depth here, you might usefully address a related but slightly different question: how far did the *philosophes* intend to bring about a revolution?

Your notes probably included some of the following points:

- The *philosophes*, if not reformers themselves, pointed the way towards reform. They were convinced that their mission was for the benefit of their fellow human beings.
- The *Encyclopédie* was intended to encourage a more informed, questioning and critical attitude towards existing institutions.
- Such articles as 'Inoculation', 'Fanaticism' or 'The slave trade' in the *Encyclopédie*, and Voltaire's role in the campaign to rehabilitate Calas, exemplify the *philosophes*' desire to lessen suffering, cruelty, injustice and unreason.
- In such articles as 'Natural equality' and 'Political authority' the *philosophes* promoted notions of human rights and natural equality.

But ideas of equality as conceived by most *philosophes* were moral rather than political in inspiration. What was meant was that human beings, whether religious minorities or black slaves, should be treated with 'humanity' (for instance, by according freedom of worship to the former and emancipation to the latter), not that social or economic distinctions should be abolished. Few *philosophes* were social or political radicals, and they were mostly open-minded or eclectic about forms of government. Few were out-and-out republicans (though Rousseau expressed more radical ideas on the good society, characterised by republican virtue).

In your brief answer, then, you may have said something on the following lines:

Certainly the revolutionaries hailed the Enlightenment as the precursor of revolution. This was symbolised by the ceremonial transfer of the remains of Voltaire and Rousseau to the Pantheon. Whether Voltaire or Rousseau would have recognised the revolution that erupted 11 years after their death as their legitimate progeny is doubtful. Neither had called for the overthrow of the Old Regime, still less for terror or bloodshed.

### Exercise 12

According to R.R. Palmer, the French Revolution 'represented the Enlightenment in militant form' (1964, p. 355). State briefly how far you agree with this proposition.

There are a number of possible ways of approaching this question. If you agree with Palmer's statement, you may have included something on the following lines:

The impact of the Enlightenment on the revolutionaries' way of thinking seems undeniable, notably their confidence in the efficacy of legislation to bring about conditions in which human rights and human happiness might be realised. This is evident, for example, in Sieyès's *What is the Third Estate?*, with its grounding in Enlightenment assumptions, or in the rational principles underlying the replacement of the provinces by the departments, or in the introduction of the metric system.

Broadly, Voltaire may be said to have influenced the first, reformist, liberal phase of the Revolution epitomised in the Declaration of the Rights of Man, while Rousseau's faith in mankind's innate goodness and his ideas of the regeneration of society both enhanced this general optimism at the outset of the Revolution and also affected leaders like Robespierre, attuned as he believed himself to be to the 'general will', during its more radical course after 1792.

## 7.2 The main consequences of the Revolution

What were the main consequences of the Revolution? Any answer demands so many qualifications that the question may be best answered in broad terms. 'The Revolution', says Norman Hampson, 'put an end to a way of life' (1975, p. 174). Suddenly, the traditional assumptions of the Old Regime, the old certainties, were gone, transformed. New perspectives and new expectations took their place. 'In the long run,' Norman Davies argues, 'the Revolution probably had its greatest impact in the realm of pure ideas' (1997, p. 713), and to William Doyle, 'the real message' of the Revolution was that 'the world could be *changed*; fresh starts *could be made*' (1989, p.8). Thomas Paine had said in *Common Sense* as early as 1776 under the stimulus of the American Revolution: 'We have it in our power to begin the world over again.' He expressed the same radical conviction with equal confidence in 1791 in *The Rights of Man*, his robust reply to Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. In *The Prelude* Wordsworth recalled

... a time when Europe was rejoiced,  
France standing on the top of golden hours,  
And human nature seeming born again.

(*The Prelude*, VI.352–4)

How people responded to the Revolution determined the shape of future political discourse in Europe. Broadly speaking, there were progressives – liberals and radicals on the left, who applauded its aims and achievements (or some of them) – and conservatives on the right, who did not. What was there in the Revolution to applaud or deplore? What precedents and challenges did it set to Europe as a whole?

- *Rule by divine right and absolute monarchy* were challenged by the principle of national sovereignty proclaimed by the Revolution. The nation, not the king, was recognized as the ultimate legitimate and legitimising source of authority in the French state. This became explicit with the establishment of the republic in 1792. Written constitutions introduced a representative assembly, a legislature elected by popular suffrage.
- *A hierarchical society* juridically divided into social orders (estates), headed by a privileged nobility set apart by birth and caste, was challenged by the inclusive concept of citizenship and equality before the law. Offices of state were thrown open, theoretically at least, to individual merit, and the turmoil of events propelled new men into positions of authority in France.
- *The Catholic Church as an estate of the realm in a confessional state* was displaced by the concept of the French nation or people as a focus of common allegiance in a secular state. Church and state, identified for centuries, were separated. Freedom of religion was established and non-Catholics achieved civic equality. Civil marriage was introduced in 1792, together with divorce and *some* measure of greater equality between the sexes.
- *The rights of man*, drawn from Enlightenment ideals, were formally proclaimed. The French Revolution, as Robespierre declared, was, so far as Europe was concerned, 'the first revolution to be founded on the theory of the rights of humanity' (Furet and Ozouf, 1988, p. 685).
- *Liberty, equality, fraternity*: these were among the potent revolutionary symbols and ideas for which people were willing to die – and to kill.

- *The people, the nation, the fatherland, the republic, citizens, the nation in arms:* these slogans had a revolutionary dynamic of their own. Under the Old Regime, government, especially foreign policy, was the private business of the king and his ministers. After the Revolution, domestic and foreign policy was something in which citizens were encouraged to feel they had a personal stake and a common interest as 'children of the fatherland' (in the words of the *Marseillaise*) and members of a national army of citizen conscripts marching to the strains of a *national* anthem.

Revolutionary changes were introduced by the French armies into the territories annexed by France. By 1799 the republic had incorporated the papal enclaves of Avignon and Comtat-Venaissin (1791), Savoy (1792), Nice (1793), Belgium (formerly the Austrian Netherlands) (1795), the left bank of the Rhine and Geneva (1798). The same thing happened in the six satellite states or 'sister republics': Holland ('the Batavian Republic'), Switzerland ('the Helvetic Republic') and the four Italian republics (see Figures 8 and 9). Each republic had its constitution, based on the French model. The constitution proclaimed the sovereignty of the people, as laid down in article 3 of the Declaration of the Rights of Man, and 'the nation's rightful power to determine its own destiny' (quoted in Bouloiseau, 1983, p. 10); that is, it invoked the principle of self-determination, denying the right of kings to dispose of peoples without their consent.



Figure 8 The departments of revolutionary France, 1793–9. Photo: William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution*, Oxford University Press, 1989. By permission of Oxford University Press



Figure 9 The expansion of revolutionary France, 1793–9. Photo: E.J. Knapton, *Revolutionary and Imperial France 1750–1815*, Scribner, New York, 1972

## 7.3 The Great Nation

The expanded France, which styled itself the Great Nation, provoked a second European coalition against it, but by 1799 it had established itself as a force to be reckoned with: a military force in the first instance but also and not least a potent ideological force. Its influence and attraction spread far beyond its frontiers to other peoples under foreign rule, to Poland under the dominion of Prussia, Russia and Austria, to Greece under the Turks, and to Ireland under the British. A Dublin ballad ran:

Oh! May the wind of Freedom  
 Soon send young Boney o'er,  
 And we'll plant the Tree of Liberty  
 Upon our Irish Shore!

(Palmer, 1964, p. 336)

### Exercise 13

For a detailed discussion of the impact of the Revolution in Britain, now listen to tracks 1–7: *Britain and the French Revolution* (found below) and consult the related AV Notes also below) (Among other things, these refer you to the illustrations discussed in the recording.) The following two paragraphs are a summary of reaction in Britain to the Revolution.

Click to view The AV notes relating to the audio extracts.

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[Audio 1: An impression of the French Revolution and the British reaction](#)

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[Audio 2: An extract from Edmun Burke's \*Reflections on the revolution in France\*](#)

Audio content is not available in this format.

[Audio 3: An extract from Tom Paine's \*The rights of man\*](#)

Audio content is not available in this format.

[Audio 4: 'Peace and bread'](#)

Audio content is not available in this format.

[Audio 5](#)

Audio content is not available in this format.

[Audio 6: The Irish reaction](#)

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[Audio 7: Conclusions about the British reaction](#)

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In Britain the government was alarmed both by a revolutionary ideology which challenged its traditional political and social structure and by the re-emergence in a new form of the French threat to the European balance of power, signalled by French expansion into the Low Countries. Both factors explain Britain's participation in the wars against revolutionary (and then Napoleonic) France from 1793 onwards. A French attempt in 1796 to land troops at Bantry Bay was followed by rebellion in Ireland in 1798, leading to the Act of Union (1800) between Ireland and Great Britain. Naval mutinies at Spithead and the Nore in 1797 seemed to the authorities to reflect the influence of the Revolution.

Against this background arose a ferment of radical ideas, initially directed towards removing the civil disabilities suffered by Dissenters (Protestants outside the established Church of England) but rapidly spreading to encompass a reform of Parliament and a

widening of the franchise. Inspired by the Revolution, radical political associations were established (notably the London Corresponding Society) and radical publications were circulated widely across the country. The government of Prime Minister William Pitt, in effect a coalition government after 1794, sensing a threat to law and order, imposed a variety of repressive measures: amendments to the law of treason, the partial suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act (prohibiting detention without trial), increased control of public meetings and publications. The London Corresponding Society was proscribed in 1799. France had dictated the culture of civilised Europe since the seventeenth century. The eighteenth-century Parisian *salons* were at the heart of the Enlightenment. The French revolutionaries assumed that enlightened people everywhere would continue to look to Paris as the centre of progressive thought, would wish to be part of or at least associated with *la Grande Nation*. In August 1792 the National Assembly conferred honorary French citizenship on 17 assorted foreigners, as ‘men who in various countries have brought reason to its present maturity’ (Palmer, 1964, p. 54). These included leaders of the American Revolution George Washington, Alexander Hamilton and James Madison; Swiss educational pioneer Pestalozzi; English utilitarian philosopher and legal reformer Jeremy Bentham; the radicals Thomas Paine and Joseph Priestley; leaders of the anti-slavery campaign Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce; and German poet and playwright Friedrich von Schiller. In his *Sketch of a Historical Outline of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1793), Condorcet looked forward, in the cosmopolitan spirit of the Enlightenment, to a world in which national differences would be erased. In the same spirit of international fraternity, German admirers of the Revolution took up Schiller's *Ode to Joy*, best known in its later setting by Beethoven but in the 1790s sometimes sung to the tune of the *Marseillaise*:

Seid unschlungen, Millionen  
 Diesen Kuss der ganzen Welt!  
 [Embrace each other, ye millions,  
 Here's a kiss for all the world!]

(Palmer, 1964, p. 445)

The Revolution, both in its original underlying principles and in its later excesses, was deeply divisive in France and Europe generally. It engendered conservatism and counter-revolution just as it did liberalism. Burke had from the first denounced the attempt to remodel society on abstract principles and preached the virtues of a settled, aristocratic society, of respect for precedent, tradition and time-honoured institutions. He deplored the example of ‘those who have projected the subversion of that order of things under which our part of the world has so long flourished’ (that is, the death of the Old Regime), and predicted that the Revolution would lead to bloodshed and tyranny (quoted in Welsh, 1995, p. 114). Britain was to prove the most persistent enemy of the Revolution.

But even men passionately attracted to the Revolution became aware of the perils of violent change. ‘I dreamed of a republic’, Desmoulins wrote on the eve of his execution in 1794, ‘that would have been the envy of the world. I could not believe that men could be so cruel and unjust’ (quoted in Schama, 1989, p. xi). Even in 1794, however, when the Terror had alienated many, Wordsworth still declared himself to be ‘of that odious class of men called democrats’, the enemy of ‘monarchical and aristocratical governments’ and ‘hereditary distinctions and privileged orders of every species’ and therefore ‘not amongst the admirers of the British Constitution’ (Palmer, 1964, pp. 22, 458). Wordsworth himself was soon to change his mind and to evolve a far more critical, reflective and conservative attitude to the Revolution. Like it or not, however, everyone accepted that the French



Revolution marked an epoch in world history and that things could never be the same again.

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## Acknowledgements

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This course was written by Professor Tony Lentin

This free course is an adapted extract from the course A207 From Enlightenment to Romanticism, which is currently out of presentation

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Plate 2 Jacques-Louis David, The Death of Marat 1793, oil on canvas, 160.7 x 124.8cm, Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels. Photo: Giraudon/ Bridgeman Art Library

Plate 3 Calendar for Year III of the French Republic, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris

Plate 4 François Verly, view of the proposed public bath and theatre in Lille, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lille. Photo: © RMN/Quecq d'Henripret

Plate 5 Quatremère, group with la Patrie in the centre for the eastern nave of the Pantheon, 1793, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris

Plate 6 Joseph Chinard, bas-relief for the city hall in Lyon, 6.4 x 5.4 x 3 cm, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon. Photo: © Studio Basset

Figure 1 French School, "Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen", 1789, oil on canvas, Musée Carnavalet, Paris. Photo: Giraudon/ Bridgeman Art Library

Figure 2 The French Provinces, 1789. Photo: John Paxton, "Companion to the French Revolution", Facts on File, New York and Oxford, 1988;

Figure 3 The départements of revolutionary France, 1790. Photo: Franklin L Ford, "Europe 1780-1830", 2nd edition, Longman, 1989;

Figure 4 Villeneuve, "Matière à réflexion pour les jongleurs couronnés (Matter for thought for crowned twisters)", 1793, engraving, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris

Figure 5 The republic under internal and external attack, 1793. Photo: Marc Bouloiseau, "The Jacobin Republic 1792-1794", Cambridge University Press, 1983;

Figure 6 Joseph Chinard, "La Raison sous les traits d'Apollon foulant aux pieds la Superstition (Reason, in the person of Apollo, treading superstition underfoot), 1791, terracotta model, 51.5 x 13.3 x 12cm, Louvre, Paris. © Photo: RMN/© Christian Jean

Figure 7 Jacques-Louis Pérée, "Regenerated Man Gives Thanks to the Supreme Being", 1794-5, 41.5 x 29cm, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris

Figure 8 The départements of revolutionary France, 1793-9, Photo: William Doyle, "The Oxford History of the French Revolution", Oxford University Press, 1989. By permission of Oxford University Press, <http://www.oup.com>

Figure 9 The expansion of revolutionary Europe 1793-9. Photo: E.J. Knapton, "Revolutionary and Imperial France 1750-1815", Scribner, New York, 1972;

Jacques-Louis David, The Death of Marat 1793, oil on canvas, 160.7 x 124.8cm, Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels. Photo: Giraudon/ Bridgeman Art Library

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