

NAPOLEON AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

Key Events of 1792:

- Some notable events in 1792 included the Journee of 20th June, where a crowd demanded that the King withdraw vetoes and reinstate pro-war ministers; the issuance of The Fatherland in Danger decree, calling for support in the war effort; the Brunswick Manifesto, which further fueled anti-monarchy sentiments; and the Journee of 10th August, during which a mob attacked the Tuileries Palace, leading to the suspension of the King and the establishment of an interim executive power.
- During the expansion of the war in the early years of the French Revolution, France initially experienced success from September 1792 to January 1793. The motivation for the military advances was not only driven by revolutionary ideals but also by France's desperate need for money. The conquests brought valuable assets that could be sold for cash. One of the justifications for the war effort was the proclamation of France's old doctrine of "natural frontiers," which claimed that the Pyrenees, Alps, and Rhine should form the country's natural borders. However, this demand was controversial as the control of the Rhine was of vital economic importance to European trade, with interests from Great Britain and the United Provinces involved.
- As tensions escalated, Britain began military preparations in late 1792, and Spain and Portugal joined an anti-French coalition in 1793. Instead of waiting to be attacked, France declared war on Britain, followed by Spain (which was allied with Portugal) in March. However, by March 1793, the War of the First Coalition (1792-1797) took a turn against France, as troops were driven out of the Austrian Netherlands, and British, Austrian, and Spanish forces launched attacks into France. The French also faced serious internal revolts in the western and southern regions, which further hindered their military efforts.
- One significant uprising during this time was the Vendée uprising. The Vendée was a rural, conservative, and strongly Catholic region in central-west France. It had a large number of refractory priests and was characterized by religious resentments and social unrest. The sale of Church lands in the area had led to increased rents and worsened conditions for peasants, leaving them worse off than under the previous regime. Local noblemen and peasants took up arms against the National Convention, primarily in response to the levy for 300,000 men.
- In April 1793, the counter-revolutionary forces in the Vendée united to form the Catholic and Royal Army. This army, which grew to approximately 80,000 members, consisted mostly of farmers, labourers, and even young boys and women disguising themselves as men. They adopted the motto "Dieu et Roi" (God and King) and wore the symbols associated with the Bourbon monarchy. Despite their lack of training and equipment, the Vendéan rebels initially swept through the region, capturing significant towns and posing a threat to Paris.
- The National Convention sent 30,000 troops from the front to control the rebellion in May 1793, but the uprising continued to spread. By June, the rebels had advanced towards Le Mans, aiming for Paris. Concurrently, "federalist revolts" erupted in other parts of France, putting immense pressure on the National Convention. In August, the Convention decreed the destruction of the Vendée in an attempt to suppress the rebellion.

The conflict in the Vendée escalated into a brutal and destructive phase. The National Convention authorized the formation of the "Infernal Columns," 12 army divisions led by General Louis Marie Turreau. These columns ravaged the Vendée between January and June 1794, destroying buildings, burning crops, and committing atrocities. The repression resulted in the execution of over 6,000 people, including women and children, through various means such as guillotining, shooting, stabbing, bayoneting, and forced drownings. Farms, crops, and forests were systematically destroyed across the region.

Amidst the external and internal enemies faced by the Republic, the Jacobins, who aimed to protect the revolution and respond to the grievances of the Parisian sans-culottes, supported the implementation of "extraordinary" measures.

The disagreements within the National Convention continued between the major factions, namely the Jacobins and the Girondins. One of the main issues of contention was the implementation of price controls on basic goods. Riots erupted in Paris over the scarcity and high prices of bread, soap, sugar, and coffee. Initially, Robespierre showed little sympathy for the food rioters but realized the political advantage of supporting the demands against grain hoarders and profiteers to discredit the Girondins. The journalist Jean-Paul Marat published defamatory articles against the Girondins and blamed them for France's problems, which led to violence against Girondin printing presses.

In May 1793, approximately 8,000 sans-culottes (working-class radicals) surrounded the Convention, demanding price controls on bread. Robespierre was able to secure the vote in favour of price controls, solidifying the alliance between the Jacobins and the sans-culottes. During a Jacobin club meeting, Robespierre called for a rise against the "corrupt deputies" in the Convention, resulting in thousands of sans-culottes besieging the Convention and demanding the expulsion of Girondin deputies. To prevent a massacre or the seizure of power by a revolutionary commune, the Convention agreed to the arrest of 29 Girondin deputies and one minister.

The purge of the Girondin deputies led to Federalist revolts in the provinces, particularly in areas where Girondin support was strongest. Jacobin leaders were being expelled from office throughout France. While these uprisings were not necessarily

counter-revolutionary, the Jacobins portrayed them as such. The Federalist revolts, along with the ongoing uprising in the Vendée, posed a significant risk of civil war. In Toulon, a key naval base, the royalists went a step further and proclaimed Louis XVII as the king. However, Toulon was eventually retaken due to the strategic planning of Napoleon Bonaparte.

Amidst the internal conflicts, the Committee of Public Safety, under the leadership of Maximilien Robespierre, focused on dealing with the military crisis. Lazare Carnot took responsibility for improving the French army and sought out competent officers who were loyal to France. Carnot implemented the committee's new national mobilization of troops called the "levée en masse." This decree, issued in August 1793, requisitioned all Frenchmen for the service of the armies. The levée en masse created armies of unprecedented size and fervour, with soldiers feeling a sense of duty and commitment to their country.

France became a nation at arms, with young men fighting, married men providing supplies, women serving in hospitals and making military equipment, and even children contributing by picking rags. However, the unpopularity of conscription led to resistance, and both sides engaged in brutal tactics, including mass executions and pillaging.

Despite the internal challenges, by mid-1793, the French armies were able to go on the offensive and push back the European coalition forces that had formed against France. The revolutionary gains on the military front gave a temporary advantage to the French Republic.

The Revolutionary Tribunal was established as a court to hear cases of alleged counter-revolutionary offences from all over France. However, as the period known as the Terror intensified, the Tribunal's proceedings became more political, and legal procedures were often overridden or abandoned. Many of the trials conducted by the Revolutionary Tribunals were show trials, lacking evidence, fairness, or respect for the rights of the defendants.

The Law of Suspects, passed on September 17, 1793, had a significant impact on the tribunals. It allowed for arrests and indictments based on vague suspicions or accusations of counter-revolutionary activities or political views. This gave the tribunals even more power to act as political courts. Radical political clubs, particularly the Jacobins, had influence over the selection of individuals to be investigated, often nominating their political rivals.

The line between Jacobin groups and the revolutionary tribunals became blurred, with individuals serving on the magistrates' benches or as jurors in the tribunals while also being members of local Jacobin clubs. In some cases, the Jacobins and the Revolutionary Tribunal even shared the same building, such as in Amiens.

The Convention's Law of 22 Prairial (June 10, 1794) further eroded trial procedures and accountability. Defendants were denied the right to a defence counsel or to call witnesses on their behalf. Juries could convict based on "moral certainty," and the tribunals could only render verdicts of acquittal or send individuals to the guillotine—no other punishments were permitted. This led to a significant increase in convictions and executions.

During this period, there was also a policy of dechristianization, aimed at removing religious symbols and practices from society. Statues, plates, crosses, bells, and other religious icons were destroyed. Revolutionary and civic cults, such as the Cult of Reason and later the Cult of the Supreme Being, were introduced as alternatives to traditional religion. Non-juring priests and those who harboured them were declared liable to death on sight.

The Cult of the Supreme Being was an attempt to establish a national religion based on patriotism, republican values, and deism. However, it failed to gain widespread support or capture the public imagination. Robespierre's decision to position himself as the leader of this movement further alienated opposition and intensified criticism.

As the executions and the Terror continued, many delegates in the Convention became convinced that Robespierre intended to establish himself as a dictator. On July 26, 1794 (8 Thermidor), Robespierre addressed the Convention and accused his colleagues of plotting against the government. When asked to name those involved, he declined for the moment. Fearing that Robespierre would denounce them as traitors, a number of his former colleagues had him arrested and executed, along with his brother and 82 other supporters. This event is known as the Thermidorian Reaction and marked the end of Robespierre's rule and the decline of the Reign of Terror.

The Directory was the government that emerged in France during the Thermidorian reaction after the Reign of Terror. It was not as radical as the previous government but remained an activist revolutionary government. The executive power was placed in the hands of five Directors who were chosen by the legislative council.

The new constitution introduced several provisions to prevent the concentration of power. The non-propertied section of society had no right to vote, and two elected legislative councils, the Council of Elders and the Council of 500, ran the government. These councils appointed an executive committee called the Directory to govern.

The Directory faced challenges throughout its existence. It was marked by a turn against the asceticism of the previous government, and social events were held to amuse the middle class. However, the stark contrast between the comforts of the

wealthy and the horrible conditions of the poor caused unrest.

The economic policies implemented by the Directory, such as restoring the free market and deregulating trade, did not produce immediate improvements in living conditions. Tax collection was sporadic, and the cancellation of the national debt alienated the bourgeoisie. Food shortages and inflation persisted, leading to discontent and sans-culotte insurrections.

The Directory also had to contend with attempts at royalist counter-revolution and internal divisions between those favouring radical egalitarianism and those desiring a return to monarchy. The government faced multiple coups, including the Coup of Fructidor and the Coup of Brumaire.

Ultimately, the Directory failed to bring stability or peace to France. It struggled to govern effectively and lacked the support of both the bourgeoisie and the sans-culottes. The economic policies did not alleviate the hardships faced by the population, and the Constitution limited suffrage to the property classes.

In the midst of these challenges, General Napoleon Bonaparte emerged as a prominent figure. He played a crucial role in the Coup of Brumaire, which led to the establishment of the Consulate regime and a new constitution. The Directory was replaced, and Napoleon eventually became the First Consul of France.

Napoleon Bonaparte, one of history's most influential figures, was born on August 15, 1769, on the island of Corsica. He grew up in a modest family, but his intelligence and ambition set him apart from an early age. His early life was marked by his education at the French military academy of Brienne-le-Château, where he excelled in his studies, particularly in mathematics and history.

At the age of 16, Napoleon received a scholarship to the prestigious *École Militaire* in Paris, where he further honed his military skills and developed a strong interest in the political landscape of France. In 1785, he graduated as a Second Lieutenant in the artillery regiment. However, his career took a temporary setback due to his Corsican accent and limited knowledge of the French language.

In 1792, the French Revolution was in full swing, and Napoleon eagerly embraced the revolutionary ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity. His military prowess and strategic acumen quickly propelled him through the ranks. In 1796, as a general, he led the successful Italian campaign, defeating Austrian and Italian forces and expanding French influence in the region.

Napoleon's victories in Italy brought him considerable fame and acclaim. Taking advantage of political instability in France, he returned to Paris and orchestrated a coup d'état in November 1799, overthrowing the Directory and establishing the Consulate. As the First Consul, Napoleon centralized power in his hands, effectively becoming the de facto ruler of France.

During his Consulate, Napoleon implemented significant reforms, known as the Napoleonic Code, which aimed to consolidate and modernize French law. He also focused on stabilizing the economy, promoting education, and improving infrastructure. These measures helped solidify his support among the middle class and garnered widespread popularity.

In 1804, Napoleon took a bold step and declared himself Emperor of the French, effectively ending the era of the French Revolution and establishing a new imperial dynasty. His coronation ceremony took place at Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris, with Pope Pius VII in attendance. This move consolidated his power and granted him greater legitimacy on the European stage.

Napoleon's military campaigns and conquests defined his reign as Emperor. He sought to expand French influence across Europe, aiming to establish a continental empire. His armies triumphed in numerous battles, including the historic Battle of Austerlitz in 1805 and the Battle of Jena-Auerstedt in 1806. These victories resulted in the creation of satellite kingdoms and the establishment of the Confederation of the Rhine.

However, not all of Napoleon's military ventures ended in success. The disastrous French invasion of Russia in 1812 and the subsequent campaigns against the Sixth Coalition led to his downfall. Defeated at the Battle of Leipzig in 1813, Napoleon was forced to abdicate and was exiled to the island of Elba.

His exile proved to be temporary, as he escaped Elba in 1815 and returned to France in what became known as the Hundred Days. However, his final defeat came at the Battle of Waterloo, where he was decisively beaten by the Seventh Coalition led by the Duke of Wellington and Prussian Field Marshal Blücher. This defeat marked the end of Napoleon's rule.

After his defeat at Waterloo, Napoleon was exiled once again, this time to the remote island of Saint Helena in the South Atlantic, where he spent the remainder of his life. He died on May 5, 1821, at the age of 51.

Napoleon's legacy is immense. His military strategies, administrative reforms, and legal code left a lasting impact on France and much of Europe. The Napoleonic era witnessed significant changes in warfare, governance, and the spread of revolutionary ideals. Despite his ultimate defeat, Napoleon's influence and historical significance endure to this day.