

## **The Reign of Terror: A Background to the Bloodshed that Saved the Revolution**

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*“They repeated that she must shout ‘Vive la nation!’ With disdain, she refused. Then one of the killers grabbed her, tore away her dress, and ripped open her stomach. She fell, and was finished off by the others. Never could I imagine such horror. I wanted to run, but my legs gave way. I fainted. When I came to, I saw the bloody head. Someone told me they were going to wash it, curly its hair, stick it on the end of a pike, and carry it past the windows of the Temple. What pointless cruelty!”<sup>1</sup>*

-Nicolas-Edme Restif de la Bretonne, September 1792

*“Now what is the fundamental principle of democratic, or popular government – that is to say, the essential mainspring upon which it depends and makes it function? It is virtue... that virtue which is nothing else but love of fatherland and its laws... The splendor of the goal of the French Revolution is simultaneously the source of our strength and of our weakness: our strength, because it gives us ascendancy of truth over falsehood, and of public rights over private interests; our weakness, because it rallies against us all vicious men, all those who in their hearts seek to despoil the people...It is necessary to stifle the domestic and foreign enemies of the Republic or perish with them. Now in these circumstances, the first maxim of our politics ought to be to lead the people by means of reason and the enemies of the people by terror. If the basis of popular government in time of peace is virtue, the basis of popular government in time of revolution is both virtue and terror: virtue without terror is murderous, terror without which virtue is powerless. Terror is nothing else than swift, indomitable justice; it flows then, from virtue.”<sup>2</sup>*

-Maximilien Robespierre, addressing the National Convention, February 5, 1794

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<sup>1</sup> Restif de la Bretonne, Nicolas-Edme, *Les nuits de Paris* (Paris: Hachette, 1960) 247-53

<sup>2</sup> France. National Convention, Maximilien Robespierre, “Speech to the National Convention”, February 5, 1794, quoted in Raymond P. Stearns, *Pageant of Europe* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1947), 404-405. <http://www.pitt.edu/~syd/terror.html> (accessed January 19, 2013).

Was the Reign of Terror necessary to the survival of the fledgling French Republic? Or was it superfluous and senseless carnage, fueled by a radically extreme and paranoid regime? Understandably, these are not simple issues to resolve, and have provoked a great degree of scholarly debate from historians such as William Doyle, Georges Lefebvre, Albert Mathiez, and Albert Soboul, with each author trying to understand the motivations and actions of not only the twelve members of the Committee of Public Safety, but also of their opponents. This essay examines the threats that faced revolutionary France from 1789-1794, and will then address the actions of the Montagnard-controlled National Convention and Committee of Public Safety beginning after the expulsion of the Girondin from the National Convention in June 1793, to consider the effects that they had on French government, society, and the military.

The necessity of the Jacobin “Reign of Terror” can be traced back much further than the dropping of the guillotine blades in late 1793 to the multitude of domestic enemies that threatened to dismantle the populist gains of the Revolution. These enemies included the Bourbon monarchy, the aristocracy, conservative clergy members, and legislative members who hindered the success of the war effort and the stability of the French economy. Their efforts to unravel the revolution cement a view of the Jacobin Terror as an act of political bloodshed; a societal purge that maintained the strength of Parisian leadership of the Revolution and rallied French passions for the economic and military successes of 1794.

Prior to and during Montagnard control of the French Revolutionary government, the French government faced numerous and serious domestic threats to the survival of the revolution. These included threats from the Bourbon monarchy, former aristocratic members of the Ancien Régime, the rebels of the Vendée, Girondin and Federalist resistance, and the Catholic Clergy opposed to the Civil Constitution of 1790. While not all of these forces were

counter-revolutionary, their opposition to the French government in its various forms from 1789 to 1793 either threatened to undermine support for the regime within France, or to assist the foreign invaders of the First Coalition. The Montagnard response to its enemies, which it perceived as counter to the ideals of the Revolution, and harbingers of a return to Louis XVI's absolute monarchy, was radical action, which included the Reign of Terror that began in September 1793 and concluded with the fall of the Montagnard government and the execution of Maximilien Robespierre in July 1794.

The duplicitous actions of King Louis XVI had endangered the revolution even from its infant stages in 1789, and as the revolution progressed and spread beyond Paris, the deceptive nature of the monarch remained unchanged. Indeed, King Louis XVI grew increasingly resistant to the concept of a constitutional monarchy, and he became more of an impediment to the good governance of France. Despite his claims to have adopted “without hesitation a favorable constitution,” his stated willingness to “bequeath him [his son Louis XVII] a constitutional monarchy,” and his reaffirmation of happiness and freedom within the new French government, Louis's actions proved his desire to undermine the revolution and restore the Ancien Régime.<sup>3</sup> The King sought to flee in order to regroup with his supporters on the frontiers of France, to weaken the Legislative Assembly against its internal detractors, even as he was also complicit in starting a war with Austria, and pleading with foreign governments to intervene on behalf of the old social order.

The Flight to Varennes, King Louis XVI's attempt to escape to royalist supporters on the frontiers of France, displayed the King's true sentiments concerning the revolution, and his

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<sup>3</sup> John H. Stewart, *A Documentary Survey of the French Revolution* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1951), 200-202. (Letter from Louis XVI to Foreign Courts, April 23, 1791)

desire to see it undone. The plan, orchestrated and financed by Count Axel de Fersen, a close friend and possible lover of Marie-Antoinette, involved transporting the King out of Paris disguised as a common bourgeoisie with a small guard, supposedly protecting a shipment of money. Louis would travel to Montmedy, into the hands of François Amour, the Marquis de Bouillé, a still loyal French general. Then, once he was safe from the Parisian clubs and the Legislative Assembly, the King would join French royalists and Austrian forces to demand the dissolution of the revolutionary assemblies and the restoration of his absolute authority.<sup>4</sup> Despite King Louis XIV's proclamations of loyalty to the Constitution of 1791, his failed attempt to flee from the watchful eyes of the revolutionaries in Paris showed his desire to restore the Ancien Régime through armed foreign intervention.

Although he was within the legal rights granted him as constitutional monarch under the Constitution of 1791, Louis XVI's rejection of legislative decrees hindering counter-revolutionary movements also undermined the very constitution which empowered him, and which he was charged with upholding. These decrees, involving émigré and clergy that had refused the Civic Oath, were designed by the Legislative Assembly to force potential counter-revolutionaries to return to France and the new social order. Louis XVI vetoed the first decree on October 31, 1791, which ordered the Count of Provence, his brother, to return to France. The Legislative Assembly was concerned about his émigré status, as the Count would be the legal regent in the event of Louis XVI's death while the Royal Prince was in his minority.<sup>5</sup> On November 9, 1791, the King vetoed a second decree, which ordered émigré to return to France, lest they be charged with "conspiracy against the *Patrie*," punished military officers who

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<sup>4</sup> Albert Soboul, *The French Revolution 1787-1789: From the Storming of the Bastille to Napoleon* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), 222-223.

<sup>5</sup> Stewart, *Documentary*, 271-272. (Proclamation Ordering the Count of Provence to Return to France, October 31, 1791)

abandoned their posts, and sentenced to death those émigré who recruited and enlisted men to resist the French government.<sup>6</sup> This was a measure designed to protect the fledgling government in Paris from military defectors forming a counter-revolutionary army outside of France.

King Louis XVI also vetoed legislation requiring that all clergy who had not already taken the Civic Oath of loyalty do so, as required by the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. If these clergy members refused, they would forfeit their pensions and stipends that they received from the government and be held accountable as accomplices for religious disorder manifesting itself as anti-government or religious sectarian violence within their parish or diocese.<sup>7</sup> This exercise of his royal veto power was another example of King Louis XVI attempting to create a constitutional crisis in France by hindering the Legislative Assembly from protecting itself against counter revolutionary threats. In vetoing the legislation, Louis XVI aided the non-oath taking, or refractory clergy, in their resistance to the French government and the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, and further enabled them to link the causes of the French Catholic Church with that of counter revolutionary forces and ideas.

However, the King's unwillingness to approve decrees designed to thwart counter-revolutionary threats did not apply if those decrees or legislative decisions would lead into a disastrous European war. Aptly playing off the political infighting within the Legislative Assembly, Louis XVI used Girondin and Jacobin animosities to further his own political agenda of restoring power to the monarchy. As the crisis with the Holy Roman Empire arose over the concentration of armed émigré across the border in Trèves, the King eagerly issued his ultimatum to the Elector of Trèves, demanding the dispersal of the émigré. Secretly, Louis hoped

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 273-274. (Decree Ordering Émigrés to Return to France, November 9, 1791)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 274-279. (Decree Requiring Non-Juring Clergy to Take the Civic Oath, November 29, 1791)

that it would be rejected, and that the crisis would erupt into war. In a letter to the Imperial Court, he wrote that "...there would be a political war in Europe and this would greatly improve the situation. The physical and moral condition of France is such as to make it impossible for her to resist even a partial campaign."<sup>8</sup> The King believed that a disastrous French defeat would lead to the restoration of his absolute authority.

As the Revolution grew in 1789 and Louis XVI began to lose control of the French government and military, he began reaching out to foreign courts with the hope that other European monarchs would assist in the destruction of the Revolution and the restoration of his absolute monarchical powers in France. In a letter from November of 1789 to Charles IV of Spain, he decried the degradation of his dynasty and royal dignity.<sup>9</sup> In a letter to the King of Prussia, dated December 3, 1791, Louis wrote of the revolutionaries' "scheme for destroying the remnants of the monarchy." Louis XVI's correspondence with other European monarchs carried the warning that their states could also succumb to the republican passions that France now endured, unless the royal families of Europe jointly resolve to aid one another. He proposed the idea of a congress of royals from Russia, Prussia, the Holy Roman Empire, Sweden, and Spain to create an armed force to stop the revolution and prevent "the evil which torments us from overcoming the other states of Europe."<sup>10</sup> While Louis XVI publically embraced the Constitution of 1791, his private correspondence shows the steadfastness of his resolve to oppose the new constitution and the Revolution. Rather than submit to the Legislative Assembly and surrender his absolute monarchical authority, Louis XVI preferred the possible devastation of France

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<sup>8</sup> Soboul, *French Revolution*, 236.

<sup>9</sup> John Hardman, *Louis XVI*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 174.

<sup>10</sup> Stewart, *Documentary Survey*, 279-280. (Counter-Revolutionary Letter from Louis XVI to the King of Prussia, December 3, 1791)

through war if it would mean the overthrow of the Legislative Assembly and the destruction of the Revolution.

Though King Louis XVI was ultimately outmaneuvered by the assemblies that gradually eroded and then abolished his absolute monarchical authority, Louis himself was a substantial threat to the early political gains of the Revolution. Although he finally failed to restore the ancien régime, the threat that he posed to the fledgling French Republic was immense. Louis XVI's attempt to flee France and the control of the Legislative Assembly would have delegitimized the new constitution and government, and helped gather crucial support for counter-revolutionary forces. Having failed to escape France and finding himself confined within Paris, Louis XVI still found ways to frustrate the government of France, using his power of veto to thwart important measures intended to hinder and thwart counter-revolutionaries. Yet Louis XVI was not only willing to support counter-revolutionaries to resist the French government; he would see the devastation of France at the hands of foreign invasion if it meant the return of his absolute monarchy.

The King and his royalist supporters were not alone in their counterrevolutionary activities. Reactionary elements of the French Nobility, through the assembly of notables, played a significant role in driving King Louis XVI to call the Estates General in 1789 by refusing to sanction Calonne's proposal to reform the French tax system, and instead suggesting a convention of the three estates for the first time since 1614. Though this significant action would ultimately lead to the Revolution and his downfall, the nobility was outraged and disgusted with the radical transformations of French government and society that followed. Indeed, much like Louis XVI, members of the nobility such as Dumouriez and de Bouillé feigned loyalty to the Revolution while seeking to undermine it and the threats it constituted to their historic noble

privileges. The nobility sought to use its hold on the French military to cripple the Revolution, to foster civil war by removing the King from the control of the National Convention through outright treason and the support of revolt and rebellion in disaffected regions of France.

As the threat to Louis XVI's crown and person became increasingly apparent between 1789 and 1792, the danger to the Revolution of the aristocratic entrenchment in the military also became obvious. Still loyal to the ancien regime, generals from the nobility created dissent within the military by punishing, dismissing, and disgracing those soldiers within their armies supportive of the Revolution and abusing their control of regimental funds.<sup>11</sup> As a result of these abuses, soldier mutinies against the corruption of their aristocratic generals forced violent conflict between units, and also disrupted and damaged the cohesion of the armies.

Aristocratic resistance to the attacks on their status and privileges within military ranks had begun early during the Revolution in 1789. Admiral d'Albert thwarted workmen's attempts to join the National Guard in Toulon, and forbade the wearing of the National Guard cockade, causing a mutiny of workmen and sailors in November 1789.<sup>12</sup> However, these disruptive incidents were not limited to Admiral d'Albert or Toulon, as similar aristocratic abuses and resulting mutinies occurred throughout France, in Brest, Strasbourg, Marseilles, and Perpignan.<sup>13</sup> These mutinies and outbursts against the abuses of noble privilege in the military were not limited to any particular region, this aristocratic retribution and resulting disorder could be found throughout France.

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<sup>11</sup> Albert Mathiez, *The French Revolution*, trans. Catherine A. Phillips (New York: Russell & Russell Inc., 1962), 74

<sup>12</sup> A circular symbol or knot of ribbons with distinctive colors pinned to a hat to display political allegiance.

<sup>13</sup> Mathiez, *French Revolution*, 74-75



At Nancy in August of 1790, the most serious of these soldiers' mutinies occurred and was violently suppressed. Soldiers of the *régiment du Roi*, the *regiment de Mestre-de-Camp Général*, and the *régiment suisse de Châteauevieux* mutinied following the excessively brutal punishment of soldiers who had demanded an audit of the regimental funds and had been subsequently beaten and forced to run a gauntlet. In response to the mutiny at Nancy, the Marquis de Lafayette ordered General de Bouillé to take "vigorous measures against the mutineers," who then ignored parley attempts from the mutineers and marched on Nancy. The mutiny, which had erupted because of the abuse of noble privileges within the military, was suppressed in a manner of contempt and scorn for the mutineers. Lafayette encouraged military actions without heed to the soldiers' grievances, and de Bouillé was determined to force a military confrontation rather than to convince the mutineers to stand down and peacefully surrender. Following the defeat of the mutinous regiments on August 31, their political clubs were closed, twenty of the mutineers were hanged, and forty-one were condemned to serve on the galleys.<sup>14</sup> This was certainly a defeat for the mutinous soldiers, but a disaster for the Second Estate, as such cruel actions only highlighted the aristocratic abuses of their military privileges to the more radical elements of the Revolution. Lafayette, de Bouillé, and other French nobles within the military were willing to use to cruel and violent measures to retain their privileges against the commoners and bourgeoisie soldiers within the military.

The King's attempted flight to royalist supports at Montmedy, which had been devised and enacted with the complicity of elements of the nobility, was another indicator of their lack of loyalty to the Revolution and danger to the French government. The conspiracy sought to free the King from his captivity in Paris and deliver him safety to a royalist army led by General de

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<sup>14</sup> Mathiez, *French Revolution*, 75-76.

Bouillé, the same de Bouillé who was responsible for the violent suppression of mutineers in Nancy in 1789.<sup>15</sup> However, this was not the first attempt to rescue Louis XVI from Paris; a previous attempt to escort him from the Tuileries had been attempted by four hundred nobles. Acting while the National Guard was quieting a disturbance at the Chateau de Vincennes on February 28, 1791, the *chevaliers du poignard* were only thwarted by Lafayette's quick return.<sup>16</sup> If either of the attempts to rescue Louis been successful, the King's escape to the French frontier or to the Austrian lines would have provided a powerful symbol around which the counter-revolutionary forces could rally.

Noble émigré under the leadership of King Louis XVI's brother, the Comte D'Artois threatened the Revolution by seeking the courts of foreign, European monarchs and hoping to persuade them to take direct, military action against the revolutionaries in Paris. By September 1789 the Comte D'Artois had established a quasi-sanctuary for noble émigré in Turin, in the Kingdom of Sardinia, ruled by his father-in-law Victor Amadeus III. From here the Comte D'Artois first began to reach out to European monarchs for assistance, such as the Austrian Emperor Joseph II and the Spanish King Charles IV, urging them to use their militaries to pressure the French government into releasing Louis XVI and the royal family, but he was not successful.<sup>17</sup> In May 1791 the Comte D'Artois first met with the Austrian Emperor, now Leopold II, who had succeeded his heirless, older brother in September of 1790, but was refused any tangible support. A month later, the noble émigré relocated to Coblenz, and in July the Comte D'Artois met with Leopold II and Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm in Pillnitz, where the two

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<sup>15</sup> Sobul, *Revolution 1787-1789*, 222.

<sup>16</sup> Mathiez, *French Revolution*, 124-125.

<sup>16</sup> *The Chevaliers du Poignard, translated as the Knights of the Dagger, were named such after the fact to mock their attempt to free the Louis XVI.*

<sup>17</sup> Jacques Godechot, *The Counter-Revolution Doctrine and Action 1789-1804* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 149-152.

German monarchs dismissed émigré pleas for direct, military involvement, but agreed to the Declaration of Pillnitz, which warned the French revolutionaries against further actions towards the French royal family.<sup>18</sup> Though the Comte D'Artois was unsuccessful in convincing the European monarchies to secure the release of the French royals and aid the counter revolutionaries, the growing interest of the Austrians and Prussians in the well-being of the French monarch showed the dangerous influence that the émigré could have abroad.

The defection and treason of Charles Dumouriez, General of the Armée du Nord, was a disaster for the French military, and another indicator of aristocratic resistance to the Revolution. Events in the first weeks of March 1793 had already begun to indicate that Dumouriez had become contemptuous of the actions of the National Convention, such as the closing of political clubs in Belgium, the restoration of church property, and the arrest of Executive Council commissaries.<sup>19</sup> On March 23, only days after his defeat at Neerwinden by the Austrian Prince of Saxe-Coburg, Dumouriez was in contact with the Austrian camp, plotting to dissolve the Convention, restore the Bourbon monarchy, and surrender Belgium to the Austrian forces. Though Dumouriez arrested and handed over Commissaries from the National Convention sent to arrest him, he was ultimately not able to convince the Armée du Nord to march on Paris to dissolve the convention. Instead, he was forced to flee to the Austrian lines after he was fired upon by Battalion Commander Davout and volunteers from Yonne in the first week of April.<sup>20</sup> Dumouriez's defection was a disaster for the Armée du Nord, for the morale of the struggling French military, and for his supporters within the government, such as members of the Girondin factions and Georges Danton.

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<sup>18</sup> Godechot, *Counter-Revolution*, 155-157.

<sup>19</sup> Mathiez, *French Revolution*, 300.

<sup>20</sup> Mathiez, *French Revolution*, 302.

Members of the aristocracy also sought to take advantage of rebellions and insurrections within France, especially in disaffected regions outside of Paris such as the Vendée, Midi, and the cities of Lyon and Toulon. In the Vendée, the nobility arrived months after the initial uprising in early March with the intent of leading the farmers and peasants that had risen up against the government in Paris, such as Lescure and Rochejacquelein, who joined the Vendée revolt only after the defection of Dumouriez in April, 1793.<sup>21</sup> In the Midi, the nobility attached themselves to the Catholic and royalist camp entrenched at Jalès in August 1790, which was finally forcibly dispersed in February of 1791.<sup>22</sup> During the Federalist Revolt, counterrevolutionary nobility arrived in Toulon and Lyon to organize and command those cities' resistance to the republican government. In Lyon, the comte de Precy commanded the defenses of Lyon and quickly staffed his headquarters with nobility and émigré, while in Toulon, nobility and royalist refugees raised the Bourbon flag under the protective watch of British forces commanded by Admiral Hood.<sup>23</sup>

After it became clear that the conservative reforms that the nobles sought would not occur and that it would not benefit from the radical transformation of French politics and society brought about by the Revolution, the French aristocracy maligned and impeded the security and stability of the new government at every opportunity. Generals such as de Bouillé and Dumouriez worked to cripple the military by harassing non-noble soldiers, conspiring with royalists, using their military positions to scheme for personal power, and ultimately, defection. In the Vendée and other disaffected regions of France, they attempted to subvert local discontent with the failure of the Revolution to bring meaningful change and turn that discontent into royalist insurrections. The nobles also fostered civil war by attempting to garner support in

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<sup>21</sup> Mathiez, *French Revolution*, 308.

<sup>22</sup> Soboul, *Revolution 1787-1789*, 170, 212.

<sup>23</sup> David Andress, *The Terror: The Merciless War for Freedom in Revolutionary France* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 187-188, 237.

foreign courts and they hired foreign mercenaries with the intent of returning to France to dissolve the new government and restore the ancien regime. Their actions were a serious danger to the survival of the Revolution, and one that the Jacobins were keenly aware of as they assumed control of the French Republic in 1793.

Conservative elements of the French clergy were also a threat to the survival of the ideals of the Revolution and the republican government in Paris. The curés that supported the Revolution hoped that it would address class and corruption issues within the French Catholic Church, which saw a vastly uneven distribution of church funds between the more rural, lower-orders and the more urban, higher-orders, chapters, bishops, and cardinals.<sup>24</sup> Although the lower-order clergy administered parishes that provided over half of the French Catholic Church's total funds, they had no say in the allocation of these funds instead, this privilege was reserved for the higher-orders and members of the clergy.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, access to the more influential higher-orders and rank within the French Catholic Church was informally restricted to the off-spring of wealthy nobles, who could pay to ensure the advantageous placement and advancement of their sons. The result of this was that in 1789 nearly the entirety of the higher-orders and upper echelons of the French Catholic Church consisted of noble-born officials from just thirteen noble families.<sup>26</sup> The economic and social divisions that plagued late eighteenth century France were mirrored in the French Church.

The overwhelming support that the curés gave the Revolution was first manifested in the elections and convening of the Estates General in 1789. Despite the expectations from the Church hierarchy that the upper-echelon of the clergy would be selected, they were in fact

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<sup>24</sup> Curés are parish priests or pastors, normally of the lower orders.

<sup>25</sup> William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 34.

<sup>26</sup> Doyle, *Oxford History*, 34-35.

terribly rejected; of the 303 deputies elected to represent the First Estate, over 75% were curés, 15% were bishops, and the remaining 10% were a scattered assortment of officials from varying religious orders, chapters, and urban parishes.<sup>27</sup> As a result of the success of the curés in the delegation elections, the demands of the First Estate mostly represented their interests, including: “higher stipends, abolition of tithe impropriation, unrestricted access to diocesan administrative posts, canonries, and bishoprics[SIC], and church government by elected synods.”<sup>28</sup> Though the curés agreed with the Church hierarchy on the role of the French Catholic Church in French society, they hoped that the Revolution would bring egalitarianism to the Church without challenging that privileged societal status.

The hope and faith that the curés placed in the ideals and goals of the early stages of the French Revolution concerning ecclesiastical affairs was irrevocably destroyed for many of the clergy with the introduction and establishment of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy in July of 1790. The Civil Constitution of the Clergy was by no means the start of the French government’s consolidation of the Church into the realm of the State. Tithes had been abolished and Church revenue nationalized in late 1789, and many ecclesiastical orders had been dissolved in February of 1790, while the administration of church property had been handed over to the French government in April of 1790. Whereas the previous ecclesiastical reforms had concerned themselves with the revenue and expenditures of the French Catholic Church, the Civil Constitution of the Clergy sought to completely reorganize Catholicism in France. In addition to restructuring the boundaries and number of dioceses and parishes in France, and guaranteeing an annual salary of livres as compensation for the loss of church tithes and vestry fees, the Civil Constitution of the Clergy subjugated the French Catholic Church to the French government, and

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 99.

not the Pope.<sup>29</sup> For many conservative members of the clergy, this was overstretching state authority. The ecclesiastical measures being passed by the National Assembly no longer were reforms concerning hierarchical corruption. Instead, they were an attack on the Catholic Church itself. This was only reinforced by the refusal of Pope Pius VI to sanction the Civil Constitution of the Clergy and break the Concordat of 1516.<sup>30</sup> As oaths were taken and refused surrounding the clerical acceptance of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, it was in French Catholicism that the Counter-Revolution obtained its first real amount of popular support.

The refractory clergy, or those members of the French clergy who refused to take an oath of loyalty to the French constitution, became a potent, counter-revolutionary threat following the passing of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. These threats from the clergy manifested in the poorer and more religiously fervent portions of the French countryside, particularly in southern and western France. With few exceptions, Catholicism and the refractory clergy normally played a supporting counter-revolutionary role, linking French traditions, religion, and monarchy, advocating them as the solution to the radical regime in Paris, which it blamed from the economic troubles France endured through the early 1790s.

The most dangerous threat to the survival of the Revolution and the republican government to arise as a result of the counter-revolutionary, refractory clergy was the uprising in the Vendée that began in March of 1793. Though the uprising in the Vendée was primarily a popular response to the economic hardships that remained unaddressed first by the Legislative Assembly and later the National Convention, in conjunction with unpopular conscription

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<sup>29</sup> Doyle, *Oxford History*, 136-142.

<sup>30</sup> The Concordat of 1516 guided relations between the King of France and the Pope. It gave the King authority of the Church in France in temporal matters, and a great measure of control over ecclesiastical property holdings. The Pope still maintained authority in spiritual matters.

measures enacted to sustain the French armies to combat the foreign enemies of the French government, the refractory clergy also played a prominent role in the anti-government violence throughout the region, as the rebels targeted priests who had sworn the oath to the constitution for violence and adorned themselves with religious imagery.<sup>31</sup> The refractory clergy did not take up arms themselves, but they encouraged and gave religious sanction to the anti-government crusade of the Vendéans.

John McManners argues in *The French Revolution and the Church* that the violent uprising that occurred in the Vendée was based solely upon the economic hardships of the regions, as well as the rural alienation from the perceived “foreign” metropolitan government in Paris. McManners contends that since the refractory clergy did not incite the Vendéans to rebellion, religion did not play a role in the outbreak of violence in that département. He points to reduced revenue in the Vendée département as well as the increased taxation upon the rural poor and the reintroduction of conscription, the levée en masse, which authorized a national levy of 300,000 conscripts, as the reasons behind the Vendéan uprising against the republican government. McManners explains the avowed Catholicism of the Vendéan rebels away as merely a product of the religiously conservative region and as their subconscious method for rationalizing their armed rebellion against the French Republic to themselves.<sup>32</sup> McManners sees the refractory clergy and Catholicism not as the causes of the Vendéan rebellion, but rather as a subconsciously derived rallying cry from the Vendéans and as a scapegoat from the atheist, Parisian, republicans.

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<sup>31</sup> Mathiez, *French Revolution*, 309.

<sup>32</sup> John McManners, *The French Revolution and the Church* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1982) 81-84.



McManners is correct in identifying the economic hardships and outrage with the levée en masse as two of the primary reasons for the Vendéan uprising against the republican government, but the Catholic religion was also at the heart of the conflict. The Vendée in 1793, in addition to being a poor, rural département, was so staunchly Catholic that it did not even have a Protestant minority. The French Catholic Church was involved in nearly all of the social activities and traditions of the peasantry. With little access to the metropolitan activities and lifestyle, and no means of procuring them, the lives of the peasants revolved around their local parishes. It is not surprising then, that when the rural curés rejected the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, the peasantry overwhelmingly rallied behind them.<sup>33</sup> The clergy of the Vendée, like their counterparts in Western France, refused the oath in numbers greatly disproportionate to the other départements of France. While the average percentage of refractory clergy per département throughout the rest of the nation was 55%, the average in Western France was closer to 90%.<sup>34</sup> Catholicism was not a sub-conscious motivation for the Vendéans, used only for their own personal self-justification, as McManners argues. It was an important and central aspect of the Vendéan Uprising.

Although the most resolute clerical resistance to the Revolution began with the adoption of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy in July of 1790, some clerical counterrevolution preceded it. François Froment, a spurned Catholic ecclesiastic who visited the comte d'Artois in Turin in January 1790, gained approval to capture towns in the Midi in preparation of an émigré invasion and raised a small Catholic military unit.<sup>35</sup> In the city of Nîmes in June of 1790, prior to departmental elections, Froment's Catholic militia clashed with Protestant National Guardsmen.

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<sup>33</sup> Arno J. Mayer, *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 327.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 328.

<sup>35</sup> Godechot, *Counter-Revolution*, 152.

For four days, Froment's militia, reinforced by religiously fervent peasants from the surrounding countryside, fought the Guardsmen for control of Nîmes, though they were ultimately defeated and suffered close to 300 deaths by the time the fighting ended. The Protestant minority in Nîmes not only physically controlled the city, but also won sound victories in the département elections.<sup>36</sup> As a result, Catholics in and around Nîmes saw the Revolution and the republican government not only as anti-Catholic, they viewed it as potentially pro-Protestant.

Following the outbreak of war between France and Austria, and soon thereafter, France and Prussia, the Girondin quickly proved themselves to be impediments to military victory and therefore a threat to the survival of the Revolution, for if the French military failed to resist the foreign invaders, the ancien regime would reestablish itself in France. As the French economy and military faltered in the face of foreign threats, the Girondin, as representatives of the middle-class, property-owning French, were unwilling to embrace the necessary reforms to safeguard the nation and the Revolution. Furthermore, once their power and influence diminished in Paris and they were expelled from the National Convention, it was the Girondin who threatened to plunge the fledgling republic into civil war through insurrections advocating federalism and the reduction of Parisian power, as well as seeking reconciliation with and assistance from the same, reactionary counterrevolutionaries who sought to destroy the Revolution and reinstate the Bourbon monarchy. Though the Girondin themselves were not, as a whole, counter revolutionary, it was their inept governance and ultimate treason that nearly destroyed the Revolution at the hands of insurrectionary royalists and foreign soldiers.

Ever fearful of legislative assaults on property rights and supportive of laissez-faire economic policies, the Girondin were apprehensive about taking the decisive, radical actions

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<sup>36</sup> Doyle, *Oxford History*, 137-138.

needed to safeguard the Revolution, and terrified of the sans-culottes and lower-class French men and women whose support they would need to effectively run the country. In spite of rampant price inflation and food shortages in Paris, which had led to increased popular support for extreme radicals such as the Enragés and Jacques Hébert, the Girondin refused to entertain the notions of supply and price regulations.<sup>37</sup> Anxious about the increasing power of the lower-class, especially those already serving in the French army, the Girondin opposed military reforms to reorganize the army and merge professional and volunteer units, and also opposed attempts to increase recruitment of much needed volunteers in spite of manpower shortages and foreign invasion.<sup>38</sup> Further, in seeking to diminish the influence which Paris held over the National Convention, their advocacy of a more federated state would have decentralized power in France at a time when centralization was necessary for a successful conduct of the war effort against Austria and Prussia.<sup>39</sup> The failure of the Girondin to coordinate between the rebellious départements during the Federalist Insurrection hints at the disastrous effects that their policies would have had on military organization and effectiveness in combating the Austrian and Prussian threat to the Revolution.

It was Girondin ineptitude that led to unnecessary war with Austria and Prussia in the spring of 1792, nations that, while concerned with the well-being of the Bourbon royals and the general affairs in France, had no direct interest or desire for war that year. Both Austria and Prussia, along with Russia, were far more interested in territorial gains to the East, particularly in Poland. Although all three powers were nominally opposed to the French revolutionaries and the concept of republicanism, no power desired to risk a commitment to a conflict with France and

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<sup>37</sup> Morris Slavin, *The Making of an Insurrection: Parisian Sections and the Girondin* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 4.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-8.

render itself unable to acquire Polish lands as a result.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, Austria, after having recently emerged from a victorious but disappointing war with the Ottoman Empire, still faced potential threats from the Prussians and Polish to the North.<sup>41</sup> The lack of interest that that Austrians and Prussians displayed in making war on France was not unique; the other European powers were also preoccupied. The Kingdom of Spain and Great Britain nearly went to war in a dispute over the Nootka Sound in the Pacific Northwest region of North America, a dispute which would not be resolved until 1795, long after French government had declared war on both states.<sup>42</sup> These wars, initiated by the Girondin, forced the attention of the European powers to turn to France. These declarations of war were not the response of foreign threats or activities, however; rather, they pulled the French nation into unnecessary wars which threatened the French state and Revolution.

The zeal of the Girondin in forcing war with the Austrian, and soon thereafter, Prussian monarchies proved nearly fatal to the Revolution and to an unprepared French republic. The French army, plagued by desertion, disorganization, and inadequate logistical support, was not ready to wage a military campaign in 1792, let alone one against two of the great powers of Europe. In the wake of the Revolution, the army had experienced a mass desertion of its officer corps, as members of the nobility increasingly emigrated from France as the Revolution became progressively more radical and their noble privileges were dismantled. Already by June of 1791, over sixty per cent of the French officer corps had deserted their posts and fled the country to join the émigré.<sup>43</sup> Additionally, the army remained disorganized and divided into two distinct branches: one comprised of professional soldiers who had served the old regime, and one

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<sup>40</sup> T.C.W. Blanning, *The French Revolutionary Wars, 1787-1802* (New York, Arnold, 1996), 42.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>43</sup> Blanning, *Revolutionary Wars*, 85.

comprised of patriotic volunteers dedicated to the Revolution. This resulted in infighting between the two branches over matters such as rank, pay, and status, and it had already led to mutinies in 1791 in Lille, Hesdin, Perpignan, Metz, and Nancy.<sup>44</sup> The volunteers, while fervent supporters of the Revolution and the French nation, were poorly trained and exhibited poor military discipline; it was questionable how reliable they would prove under the command of noble generals.<sup>45</sup>

Ultimately, it was the Montagnard faction of the National Convention that was cognizant of the Girondin ineptitude in governing the young republic, and it was the Montagnard faction that realized that the Girondin faction, despite good intentions, was a threat to the continued existence of republicanism in France. On March 25, 1793, the Montagnard Bertrand Barère proposed the idea for a Committee of Public Safety to serve as an executive power for the French Republic, with the hope that it would consolidate legislative war measures, lead to a simpler, more centralized decision structure, and stop individual ministers and committees from impeding the war effort through conflicting interests.<sup>46</sup> Instead, the Girondin sought to use the Committee of Public Safety to promote their own political interests, to combat radicalism and Parisian influence over the National Convention. Their first target was Jean-Paul Marat, editor of the radical publication “L’Ami du peuple” and later “Le Journal de la République française,” but under overt pressure from the sans-culottes and the urban poor of Paris, Marat was acquitted. Unable to silence Marat, the Girondin attempted to move the seat of government from Paris to Versailles, but this too, due to Parisian resistance, was unsuccessful.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Doyle, *Oxford History*, 147.

<sup>45</sup> Blanning, *Revolutionary Wars*, 84.

<sup>46</sup> Doyle, *Oxford History*, 227-228.

<sup>47</sup> Doyle, *Oxford History*, 288-229.

Frustrated with Parisian obstruction of their anti-radicalism measures, the Girondin then sought to investigate and purge insurrectionary activity in Paris and the National Convention. To this end they established the Commission of Twelve, which was quickly successful in securing the arrests of Jean-François Varlet, leader of the Enragé faction, and Jacques-René Hébert, both radicals. After intense criticism of these arrests, the Girondin Maximin Isnard threatened the destruction of Paris with help from the other départements should Parisians and the sans-culottes attempt to intervene, declaring that “Soon they would search along the banks of the Seine to see if Paris had ever existed.”<sup>48</sup> This and similar Girondin statements promising département vengeance should the National Convention be assaulted by Parisians produced the opposite result than what was intended, and on June 2, 1793 outraged Parisians, along with between 75,000 to 100,000 National Guardsmen surrounded the legislative chambers of the National Convention and demanded the arrest of the Girondin deputies, a demand that the Convention complied with before the day was through.<sup>49</sup> Though the Girondin had now been purged from the very National Convention that they themselves had sought to purge, Girondin sympathizers in the départements threatened to plunge the republic into civil war.

Following the expulsion of the Girondin from the National Convention and their subsequent arrests, rebellion broke out in Girondin-sympathetic départements across France. Though many of these départements soon recanted their bold declarations against the Convention and laid down their arms, this was not the case everywhere. In Lyons and Toulon, events occurred that displayed the lengths that the Girondin would go to in order to protect their property rights over the survival of French republicanism.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 235.

Lyons had been in revolt even prior to the expulsion and arrest of the Girondin, after having recognized that Montagnard economic policy was prevailing. In early May, the city mobilized its locally controlled National Guard, overthrew the Jacobin Commune and the Jacobin municipal authorities, and declared against the convention.<sup>50</sup> Fearful of retribution from Paris, Lyons allied themselves with counter-revolutionary aristocrats, tried and imprisoned local Montagnards and Jacobins, executed the leader of the Jacobin club in Lyons, Joseph Chalier, and entrusted the command of their National Guard to a returned émigré, the Comte de Précý in July.<sup>51</sup> The resistance in Lyons, however, was short-lived, as the Army of the Alps quickly returned from its campaign in Savoy, isolated Lyons from other rebellious départements, began bombarding the city in August, encircled it in September, and finally forced the surrender of Lyons on October 9, 1793.<sup>52</sup>

Though the rebellion of Lyons had outraged the Montagnards, as France's second largest city arrested radical deputies and collaborated with émigré, the revolt in Toulon went far further in its opposition to Paris and the National Convention. In August, the Girondin and aristocracy of Toulon were bolstered by like-minded refugees from Marseilles, after infighting there had driven the Girondin and royalist rebels out.<sup>53</sup> Cognizant of the armies now sieging Lyons, and disheartened by the collapse of federalist resistance in Marseilles, the Toulonais panicked and requested the protection of the British and Spanish fleets that were currently blockading the city's access to the Mediterranean Sea. On August 27, British and Spanish soldiers occupied the city, French Admiral Jean-Honoré de Trogoff de Kerlessy surrendered his fleet, and the city

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<sup>50</sup> Doyle, *Oxford History*, 231.

<sup>51</sup> Mathiez, *French Revolution*, 318-319, 330.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 340.

<sup>53</sup> Doyle, *Oxford History*, 249.

declared for Louis XVII as King, something even Lyons had not done.<sup>54</sup> After the fall of the other insurrectionary cities, the Republican armies surrounded Toulon, which, with foreign assistance, resisted until December, when Captain Napoleon Bonaparte captured the heights surrounding the harbor of Toulon and the British and Spanish fleets were forced to withdraw and abandon the city.<sup>55</sup>

Threats to the French Revolution came from numerous and diverse elements of French society, whether they were royalist and aristocratic counter revolutionaries or the conservatives and moderates of the Revolution among the legislature and in the distant départements. The Girondin had seen the necessity of radical action to correct the economic and military troubles of France, but were paralyzed by their fear of the sans-culottes and the lower orders of Paris. The Montagnards adeptly realized that a paralyzed French government would lead France to collapse before her foreign and domestic enemies, and cast away their reservations about involving low-class French in radical action. By harnessing the patriotic zeal of the sans-culottes, the Montagnards, under the leadership of Robespierre and the Committee of Public Safety, made “Terror...the order of the day” across France.<sup>56</sup> They drove counter revolutionaries from the French armies and reformed the military along more equitable lines, more firmly linking rank and promotion with talent. They also undertook a measure of economic reforms that disposed émigré, combatted hoarding, and worked to alleviate the economic plight of the rural peasants and the urban poor.

Although many of the Old Regime generals and officers had joined the émigré and fled France long before the fall of the Girondin in May and June of 1793, the Montagnards were

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<sup>54</sup> Godechot, *Counter-Revolution*, 244-245.

<sup>55</sup> Doyle, *Oxford History*, 254-255.

<sup>56</sup> French National Convention Decree of September 5, 1793



determined that those remaining would be completely loyal to the Revolution or that they would be consumed by it. They had excellent reasons for being distrustful of military commanders with any undecided or royalist sentiments. On August 19, 1792 General Lafayette had defected to the Austrians after failing to convince his army to march on Paris, and on April 6, 1793 General Dumouriez attempted the same, which also failed and forced his defection to the Austrians.<sup>57</sup> Admiral de Troguiff de Kerlessy had betrayed his fleet, marines, and the military port of Toulon to Allied forces, and National Guard commanders in many of the départements had rebelled against the National Convention in the summer and autumn of 1793.<sup>58</sup> The Montagnard solution to heading off treason was to more effectively use fervent political commissars, making them nearly always on hand and granting them near limitless authority while on mission. 1793 and 1794 saw the dismissal of 357 high-ranking military officials, and opened positions for talented officers such as Jean-Baptiste Jourdan, Lazare Hoche, Nicolas Jean-de-Dieu Soult, and Jean-Charles Pichgru.<sup>59</sup> These were the commanders that drove the foreign invaders from French soil and launched successful offensive campaigns in the North, East, and South.

Although the Girondin had resisted the amalgamation of professional and non-professional units in the French military, the Montagnard-controlled Committee of Public Safety saw the necessity of unifying these two forces for stability within the ranks, as well as to increase the discipline and training of the non-professional soldiers, hoping to improve the overall efficiency of army. Beginning on July 23, 1793, not long after the expulsion and arrest of the Girondin deputies, the National Convention ordered generals to begin *embrigadement*, wherein two battalions of non-professional soldiers would be combined with a battalion of professional

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<sup>57</sup> Blanning, *Revolutionary Wars*, 72, 99.

<sup>58</sup> Godechot, *Counter-Revolution*, 244-245.

<sup>59</sup> Blanning, *Revolutionary Wars*, 118, 126-127.

soldiers to form a demi-brigade. The goal of demi-brigades was to improve the training and skill of the non-professional soldiers while infusing revolutionary spirit into the professional soldiers.<sup>60</sup> This desire for integration coincided with mass conscription aiming to bolster the strength of the French armies. In August of 1793, the National Convention declared universal conscription, and by January 1794, around 800,000 Frenchmen were available for active service, by far the largest military force in Europe.<sup>61</sup> However, these conscript were almost completely untrained, hence, the National Convention recognized the need to expand upon the *embrigadement* and fully amalgamate the military, which it ordered in January. The combination of universal conscription and amalgamation was not immediately effective for traditional, line-firing tactics employed by most European armies, as the semi-trained French units fired considerably slower than their professional Austria or Prussian counterparts. The French turned to the bayonet, neutralizing the advantage of their adversaries' faster reloading times and testing their professional discipline against French revolutionary zeal.<sup>62</sup> Committee of Public Safety member Lazare Carnot later established this as official military policy, declaring that "The essential instructions are always to maneuver *en masse* and offensively; to maintain strict, but not overly meticulous discipline...and to use the bayonet on every occasion."<sup>63</sup> The reorganization and enlargement of the French military, coupled with unorthodox tactics that best utilized semi-trained soldiers greatly assisted French successes from 1794 onwards.

The Committee of Public Safety also utilized aspects of the Terror to help resolve lingering economic issues in France. Immediately after the expulsion of the Girondin from the National Convention, the Law of June 3 was passed, which dispossessed émigré of their property

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<sup>60</sup> Blanning, *Revolutionary Wars*, 121-122.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 120-121.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 121-122.

<sup>63</sup> Blanning, *Revolutionary Wars*, 123.

holdings in France. This freed lands to be sub-divided into smaller, more manageable plots, and allowed them to be purchased with a ten year allowance for full payment.<sup>64</sup> On July 17, 1793 the Montagnards dismantled the last remaining aristocratic privileges by abolishing all feudal dues and payments without compensation.<sup>65</sup> In doing so, the Montagnard controlled Committee of Public Safety not only alleviated some of the problems faced by the peasantry, but also rallied some of the peasantry to the revolution and eliminated any remaining aristocratic power. The Montagnards also passed measures through the National Convention to improve the living conditions of the urban poor. On July 26, 1793 the National Convention passed an anti-hoarding measure that not only outlawed the practice, but made it a crime punishable by death, and on the 27<sup>th</sup>, they outlawed speculation, making it a capital offense as well.<sup>66</sup> Additionally, the Law of Maximum created on September 29, 1793 again established price controls on basic necessities, with the goal of allowing the urban poor to afford the food stuffs for survival.<sup>67</sup> Although not entirely effective, their removal in December 1794 during the Thermidorian Reaction, which subsequently saw skyrocketing prices of grain and meat and the starvation of Parisians, shows that the Law of Maximum did help to protect the urban poor.<sup>68</sup>

Though the bloodshed that France endured during the Reign of Terror was infamous in its brutality and cold, calculated execution, it was incredibly effective at shoring up domestic support for the republican government and mobilizing French resources for war. Though formally, the Terror did not begin until the autumn of 1793, its necessity can be drawn back to the abundance of domestic threats that France faced from counter-revolutionary forces such as

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<sup>64</sup> Mathiez, *French Revolution*, 337.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 338.

<sup>66</sup> Doyle, *Oxford History*, 346.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 264-265.

<sup>68</sup> Doyle, *Oxford History*, 286.

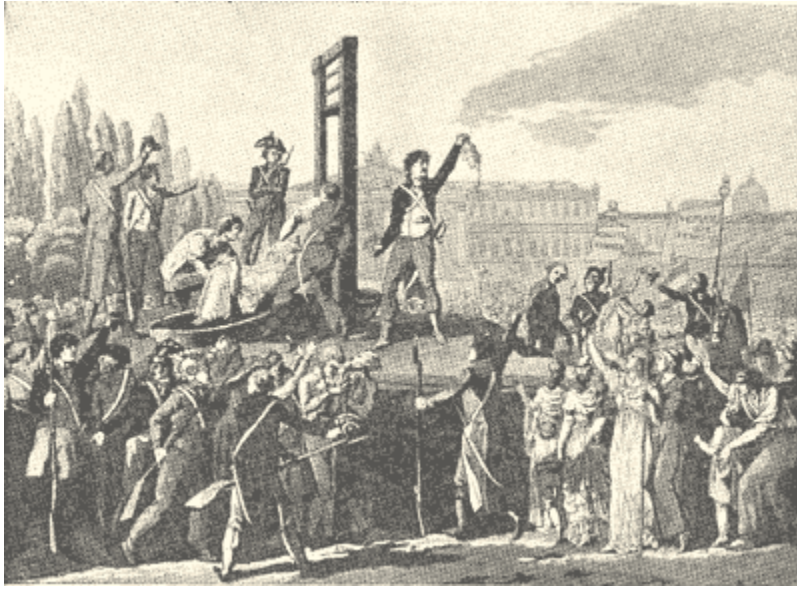
the monarchy and conservative members of the aristocracy, as early as 1789. Whether subsequent threats came from the monarchy, nobility, clergy, or even from conservatives with the legislature itself, their purging from French society and politics became necessary for centralizing executive and legislative authority while best maintaining the spirit of 1789. Robespierre and the Montagnards understood as early as the trial of King Louis XVI in 1792 that the Revolution could only succeed against their foreign and counter revolutionary enemies through decisive, radical action, and not the paralyzing indecision and moderation of the Girondin. Through extensive military reforms and a purge of disloyal commanders and officers, as well as economic and land reforms designed to alleviate the hardships endured by the working poor and maximize land-usage and efficiency, the Montagnards mobilized France for war with its enemies. The result was a drastic reversal from the low point of July 1793. As 1794 began, the federalist revolts had been defeated and royalists again driven from France, the Allied armies invading France had been turned back, and French armies were again prepared to take the offensive against the reactionary monarchies of Europe in the name of liberty.



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