

By WILLIAM DOYLE

A History of the French Revolution



MUSEE DE LA VILLE DE PARIS / BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

On June 20, 1789, the members of the Estates-General took the Tennis Court Oath, vowing never to disperse until they had given France a constitution. The oil painting was completed by Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825) in 1791.

In the summer of 1788, the French government collapsed. Eighteen months beforehand, a black hole had been revealed in its accounts, as loans incurred in the American War of Independence a decade earlier fell due. Controversial plans to meet the deficit by administrative reforms and new taxes provoked fierce resistance, culminating in demands for King Louis XVI to meet the crisis by convening national representatives in the Estates-General, a body which had not met for 175 years. Finally facing bankruptcy, the king called elections for the spring of 1789. As part of the electoral process, his subjects were encouraged to voice their discontent in lists of instructions (*cahiers*) to those they elected. Coming at a time of serious economic difficulty, with widespread unemployment and rising bread prices, this promise of change raised massive expectations for reform in all areas of national life. But the traditional form of the Estates-General gave the ruling orders (the nobility and the clergy) a built-in voting advantage and thereby the ability to block anything that threatened their interests. It became clear during the elections that most noblemen were determined to preserve these advantages, and when the assembly met in May the representatives of the nobility refused all concessions. The king did nothing to compel them. Only after six weeks of stalemate did the deputies of the Third Estate, representing the remaining 99 per cent

of the French population, lose patience and unilaterally declare themselves the National Assembly. This, June 17, 1789, was the first revolutionary moment, when sovereignty in France passed from the monarch to the Nation. A few days later, in the famous Tennis Court Oath, the revolutionary deputies vowed never to disperse until they had given France a constitution.

Initially it looked as if the king and the nobility had grudgingly accepted these claims. But when troops began to converge on Paris in the following weeks fear spread that an attempt would be made to dissolve the new Assembly by force. The determination of Parisians to defend it led on July 14 to the storming of the Bastille, the grim state prison overlooking the poor east end of the city. The troops were pulled back. The people of Paris had saved the Revolution.

The National Assembly now set about meeting the country's expectations by establishing a constitutional monarchy, elective representative government, and a guaranteed range of civil rights. It also launched social reforms whose main victims were the nobility. The determination of most nobles over the spring to retain their privileges had made them hugely unpopular, and when their leaders began to emigrate after the fall of the Bastille suspicion deepened that they remained unreconciled to the new order. In August, nobles were stripped of their traditional privileges and a Declaration of



MUSÉE DE LA VILLE DE PARIS / BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

Rights proclaimed that liberty and equality would henceforth be the guiding principles of the French Nation. The following year nobility itself was abolished, and the flow of nobles emigrating increased. Eventually the properties of absent nobles were confiscated. Years of accumulated resentment at the overbearing behavior of “aristocrats” now rose to the surface, as the Revolution progressively became, as one contemporary put it, “Everybody’s revenge.”

These resentments only increased when, in June 1791, the king himself tried to escape with his family, but was recaptured after the “Flight to Varennes.” Almost overnight, Paris became republican. Afraid of having pushed revolution too far, the National Assembly sought to conciliate Louis XVI; but foreign monarchs, urged on by French nobles who had emigrated, had begun to issue threats against the new regime. In a mood of patriotic defiance, symbolized by a new national battle hymn, *La Marseillaise*, and the wearing of red caps of liberty, like freed slaves in ancient times, France declared war against the Austrian Emperor in April 1792. It began disastrously, and it was immediately suspected that the royal family were in secret contact with the enemy: Queen Marie-Antoinette was, after all, an Austrian princess. She and the king were mobbed in the palace by crowds of self-styled *sans-culottes* (wearers of working clothes, signifying poor people). André Chénier, unknown as a poet but an opinion-

ated journalist, denounced this episode, less as a royalist than as a critic of mob rule; but on August 10 the palace was taken by storm and the monarchy overthrown with considerable bloodshed. A few weeks later in early September, as enemy forces marched towards Paris, hundreds of counter-revolutionary suspects were massacred in their prisons by angry and fearful crowds. Until now the Revolution, though turbulent, had been relatively bloodless. Henceforth, it would be forever associated with mass murder, and the new mechanical decapitator, the guillotine, which flooded the streets with blood. Its most famous victim would be Louis XVI himself, executed in January 1793 for crimes against the Nation, after a show trial conducted by the new national representative body, the Convention.

In September 1792 the invaders were turned back at the battle of Valmy, and for six months the French went on to the offensive. Belgium, western Germany, and Alpine neighbors were invaded by armies offering “Fraternity and Help” to all peoples wishing to recover their liberty, with the anti-aristocratic slogan “war on the castles, peace to the cottages.” In response, Britain, Holland, and Spain joined an alliance against the regicide republic, and its expansion ground to a halt. In Paris, the government was immobilized by conflict in the Convention between rival factions of so-called Girondins and Jacobins, the former condemning the

Left: An Execution, Place de la Révolution, between August 1793 and June 1794 (oil on canvas) by Pierre-Antoine Demachy (1723–1807).

Below right: The French Revolution has inspired generations of composers, authors, and filmmakers. In the 1935 film adaptation of Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, Ronald Colman starred as Sydney Carton.

intimidating influence of a bloodthirsty Parisian populace, the latter defending it. It was only resolved in June 1793 when the *sans-culottes* forced the expulsion of the Girondin leaders, who some months later were executed. But this forced purging of the Nation's elected representatives created outrage in several of the great provincial cities, who came out in what the beleaguered Jacobins called the "Federalist Revolt." Coinciding with an uprising of royalist peasants in the western region of the Vendée, it was more like a civil war between Paris and the provinces, but in time of war rebellion was nothing less than treason. The crisis reached its peak in early September 1793, when news arrived that Toulon, the great Mediterranean naval port, had surrendered to the British. Once more, the *sans-culottes* mobbed the Convention, demanding that, in order to overcome the republic's enemies, Terror should be made the order of the day. The Convention had little option but to comply. A Revolutionary Tribunal was already in existence to try political crimes, and government was in the hands of the Convention's Committee of Public Safety, whose most prominent member was the "incorruptible" Robespierre.

Under this "revolutionary government," normal rules of civil and political life were suspended until peace was made. The economy was tightly controlled, organized religion (identified as one of the driving forces of counter-revolution) was persecuted, and a new republican calendar was introduced. Egalitarian style was promoted, enforcing familiar forms of address—*Citoyen* (citizen) rather than *Monsieur* or *Madame*—and informal dress. Above all, there was a brutal crackdown on all opposition. Freedom of the press disappeared.

A Law of Suspects allowed anybody to be arrested and imprisoned without trial, and more than 400,000 were. Chénier, though inactive since the previous summer, was arrested under this law in March 1794. Over the preceding autumn the provincial rebellions were gradually brought under control, and savage reprisals followed. Before the Terror ended in July 1794, more than 16,000 death sentences had been handed down by revolutionary courts, and at least as many victims again had probably been dispatched in unrecorded ways. Thousands more had died in prison. Most perished in the provincial centers of revolt, but in the spring of

1794 an attempt was made to bring the Terror under closer control by concentrating trials in Paris. The result was the so-called "Great" Terror, when in four months the Paris Revolutionary Tribunal, and its implacable public prosecutor Fouquier-Tinville, sent 2,177 victims, including André Chénier, to the guillotine. In a desperate effort to clear overcrowded prisons, victims were given increasingly summary trials, with no defense counsel; and although, contrary to legend, only a minority were former nobles, there was a clear increase in their number, now under suspicion

as much for what they had been as for what they had done. In later weeks, the guillotine was moved from the center of Paris to the outskirts, to counter growing disgust at the seemingly endless slaughter—and it was here that Chénier died, only days before the Terror came to an end.

Nobody had planned the Terror, but nobody knew how to end it. To denounce it was to risk accusations of counter-revolution, and fall victim to it oneself, like Danton and his friends in April 1794. Arguably, Terror had saved the republic from its enemies, but it was now secure internally, and in the war French arms were once more proving victorious. Terror seemed to have done its work. So, when late in July (Thermidor in the new republican calendar), Robespierre claimed that more unspecified traitors needed to be culled, there was a revolt

among fellow deputies, afraid that he meant them. Robespierre was shouted down in the Convention and declared an outlaw. On July 27 he in his turn went to the guillotine, and his downfall was made the pretext for ending the Terror.

It was not the end of the Revolution. None of the basic problems which it had thrown up had been resolved. France remained at war for another eight years, and it took the same length of time to settle its quarrel with the Catholic Church. Nor could a stable republican government be found, capable of safeguarding the Revolution's reforms and achievements without the danger of lapsing back into Terror to prevent the return of monarchy. The downfall of Robespierre nearly ended the career of a promising young officer who had successfully planned the recovery of Toulon from its British invaders. But Napoleon Bonaparte survived a brief imprisonment, and six years later it would be he who finally brought the Revolution to an end, and established the stability it never managed to achieve. ❁

William Doyle is Emeritus Professor of History and Senior Research Fellow at the University of Bristol; his many publications include The Oxford History of the French Revolution (Oxford University Press, 1989; second edition, 2002) and The French Revolution: a Very Short Introduction (Oxford University Press, 2001).



BRIDGEMAN IMAGES