

HISTORY: REVOLUTIONS

French Revolution

How and why did war radicalise the revolution?

The experience of war radicalised the French Revolution and ultimately led to the overthrow of the monarchy, civil war and government by Terror. The war created a sense of panic amongst the French public, an increased fear of counter-revolution and a coup d'état and the Revolutionary Commune, all of which significantly radicalised the revolution.

France's unsuccessful start to the war created panic and paranoia amongst the French people. In April 20th 1792 France declared war against Austria, yet despite the country's optimism, the French armies were swiftly crushed. By the end of 1791, 60% of the French military's noble officers had fled overseas and consequently the army lacked experienced officers and recruits. Fighting against professional armies of Austria and Prussia, retreating French troops killed their commander (April 1792) and the armies had a high rate of desertion. Marie Antoinette's passing on of military plans to the Austrians also didn't help the French at all. This disastrous start to the war provoked panic, paranoia and accusations. The public began condemning Girondins for starting the war, and the radical measure of placing all foreigners in Paris under police surveillance was introduced. Political discussion began about the loyalty of the King and a growing fear of a coup d'état emerged.

Louis' vetoing of the Legislative Assembly's emergency measures and Lafayette's closure of political clubs heightened the growing alarm of an armed takeover. Afraid of counter-revolution, the Legislative Assembly voted three new decrees (27th May 1792), the deportation of refractory priests, abolition of the King's bodyguard and creation of a 20,000 National Guard in Paris, as emergency precautions. However, on the 19th of June Louis vetoed these decrees and thus created more suspicion that he was plotting a coup d'état. He also dismissed the Girondin cabinet on June 13th, 1792 and replaced them with more conservative monarchists. Furthermore, Lafayette's announcement that the Legislative Assembly should close down the political clubs (18th June 1792) that was intended to reduce tensions, actually gave rise to fears that Lafayette was leading a counter-revolution. In response to these events, the leaders of the Paris Sections and the sans-culottes held an armed demonstration (20th June 1792). Around 8,000 demonstrators, many of them National Guards, poured into the Tuileries and called for the recall of the dismissed Girondin cabinet members and an end to the King's power of veto. The first invasion of the Tuileries did not achieve the sans-culotte's desired outcome, as the King refused to withdraw his veto or recall the ministers; however it revealed the growing strength of the sans-culottes and their growing radicalisation. Following this near-insurrection, the Brissot became more conservative and supportive of the King, whilst the Jacobin club became more radical, demanding that the King be disposed (29th July 1792). What's more, the admission of 'passive citizens' into the National Guard and the decree 'la patrie en danger' radicalised the revolution further.

The opening up of the National Guard to the sans-culotte radicalised the revolution dramatically. On the 11th July 1792, the Legislative Assembly called upon all Frenchmen to fight. Recognising the danger of the foreign armies and the internal enemies, the Assembly declared a state of emergency by issuing the decree 'la patrie en danger'. Allowing sans-culottes to join the National Guard, the call of all Frenchmen to fight dramatically changed the nature of the guard. No longer made up of just bourgeois citizens, the National Guard was now less likely to respond to orders to repress the crowd action. Furthermore, tension in Paris increased by the arrival of the fédérés from the provinces and the publication of the Brunswick Manifesto.

The Brunswick Manifesto intensified radical demands for the King's deposition. Written by the commander of the Austrian-Prussian army, the Duke of Brunswick, the Brunswick Manifesto (25th of July 1792) was intended to help the King but it ultimately had the opposite effect. Declaring that the

people of Paris were responsible for the safety of the royal family and that Austrian troops would subject the city to “military execution” if they harmed them, the Brunswick Manifesto sparked outrage and demands for the King’s deposition. Many people who had previously supported the King, now turned against the monarchy and were radicalised. Furthermore, the presence of 5000 fédérés, of who were militant republicans, in Paris (late July 1792) put powerful pressure on the Legislative Assembly to remove the King. Extremist became much more active in the political life of France and a new insurrection seemed imminent.

The formation of the Revolutionary Commune demonstrated how radical the popular movement had become and led to the overthrow of the monarchy. Following the Brunswick Manifesto, the Paris Sections transformed themselves into a single body called the Revolutionary Commune, which came to be the government’s greatest challenge of this time. Membership was heavily working-class and its ideals reflected those of the radical popular movement. The body changed its name to Insurrectionary Commune on the 9th of August and 47 out of 48 units demanded the deposition of the King. This ultimately led to demonstrations on the 10th of August 1792 and the 2nd invasion of the Tuileries Palace. 20,000 revolutionaries stormed the palace, which was defended by 3000 troops of National Guard and Swiss mercenaries. The King was handed over by the Legislative Assembly to the commune and the royal family was imprisoned in the Temple prison. The Assembly was also forced to agree to election, by universal male suffrage, of a National Convention that was to draw up a new, democratic constitution. This led to the dissolution of the Legislative Assembly on the 20th of September 1792 and the creation of the National Convention. The monarchy was officially abolished and a republic was proclaimed on the 21st September 1792.

Thus, international war radicalised the revolution because it led to demands for the King’s deposition and the creation of a republic. The journées of 20th June and 10th August 1792, were driven by the fear and paranoia of the radical popular movement of counter-revolutionaries and ultimately led to the overthrow of the monarchy. Thus, the unsuccessful start to the war, fear of a coup d’état, opening up of the National Guard to the sans-culottes, the Brunswick Manifesto and formation of the Insurrectionary Commune were all sparked by the war and contributed to the radicalisation of the revolution.