



THE FIRST MODERN REVOLUTION

There have been violent political upheavals as long as there have been political communities: kings have been overthrown, empires have fallen, new dynasties have arisen. But only from the time of the great French Revolution have there been revolutions that sought not merely to change the rulers, but to transform the entire social and political system.

The French Revolution originated revolutions in the modern sense and it was not until after it that people knew what revolutions were like. Its events echoed down the corridors of history. There were to be new Reigns of Terror, new incarnations of Robespierre and many another Marat.

The French Revolution started quietly enough. For two hundred years France had been an autocracy or something near to it. Louis XVI, although a soft gentle character, was in theory all powerful. He ruled France; in a sense, he was France. He was also in financial difficulties. The fiscal system was decayed and creaky. Louis XVI summoned the Estates

BY A. J. P. TAYLOR



King Louis XVI.



*Maximilien Robespierre (1758-94),
future leader of the Committee of
Public Safety.*

General, the equivalent of our Parliament, to devise new ways of raising money. It had not met for nearly two hundred years, not since 1614. When it met again on 5 May, 1789, Louis XVI was still ostensibly supreme.

Within a few weeks Louis XVI grew uneasy. He was afraid that the Estate General, already calling itself the National Assembly, would encroach on



The Tennis Club Oath.



Louis XVI accepts the constitution, 14 September, 1791.

his powers. He decided to send it home. The National Assembly had not met in Paris. The old Estate General had always met wherever the king was and for more than a century past the kings of France had lived at Versailles. Paris, though by far the greatest city in France, was

disregarded. The alarm spread in Paris that the National Assembly was to be dissolved. There was a spontaneous movement led by writers, journalists and orators. The symbol of royal power in Paris was the Bastille, a fortress of little real strength. It was garrisoned by a mere

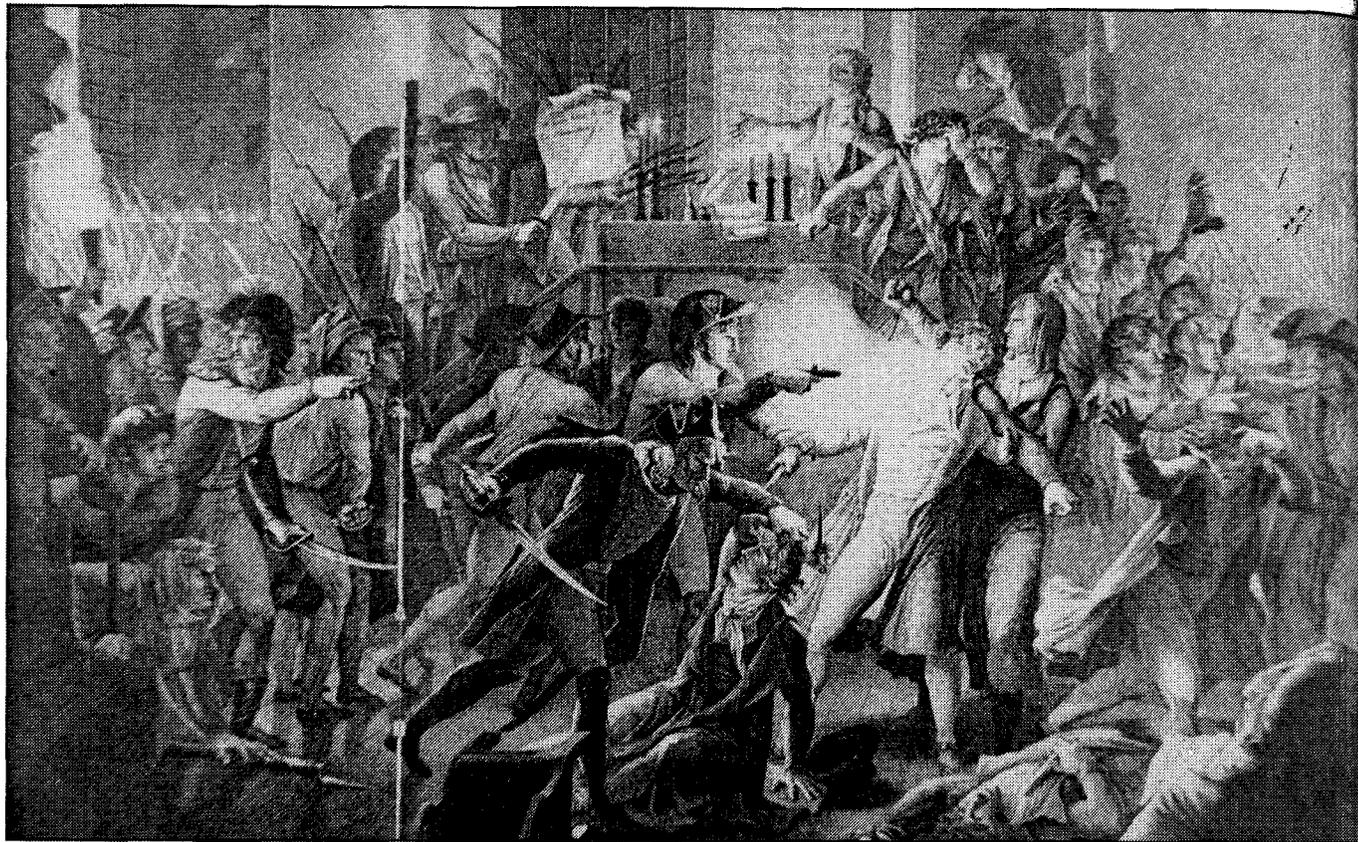
thirty soldiers, most of them elderly pensioners. The Bastille fell after a brief assault and with it there fell also the French monarchy. On 14 July, 1789, the French monarchy lost its historic prestige. Louis XVI was no longer King of France; he was merely King of the French, committed to a constitution. Historic France had gone and with it the prestige of the historic aristocracy. A new France had to be created. The National Assembly, summoned for a simple fiscal operation, now had to build a new social and political order.

The members of the National Assembly represented the educated classes of France, a highly educated country. The French Revolution was not forced on the people merely by economic hardships, though the poor were indeed very poor. There was a long background of writers who called themselves 'philosophers', whom we should call intellectuals. They held an entirely new outlook on life: reason instead of tradition, a confidence in man instead of apprehension, above all a belief that the principles of society could be formulated in a few simple sentences and would endure for ever.

The French deputies of 1789 believed that they could make a clean sweep of the past. The monarchy was first defined by a constitution and then in 1792 overthrown. The aristocrats lost their privileges and sometimes their land, though many of them survived as wealthy landed proprietors. The Church also lost its lands and was put under the direction of the state. The traditional



The Committee of Public Safety at work.



The shooting of Robespierre.

provinces-Normandy, Burgandy and so on-were abolished and replaced by new artificial *départements*.

The great achievement of the early French Revolution was the Declaration of the Rights of Man. Its very title was revolutionary. Not the rights of the king, not the rights of the upper classes, not historic rights. The Rights of Man were the rights of every citizen and rested on reason, not on tradition. The Rights of Man in their first formulation were modest: liberty, property, security and resistance to oppression. This last was included in order to sanction the revolutionary acts of resistance to Louis XVI who was in reality far from being an oppressor. 'Liberty' was the assertion that every citizen had the right to do what he pleased unless it was against the law.

'Property' was to become a cause of conflict later and in subsequent revolutions. In the past nobles had had the right to do what they liked in their castles, but the ordinary people in cottages could not. The Right of Property meant the right of every cottager to be free. Later people began to ask a different question about property: was it really satisfactory that a property-owner could do whatever he liked with his property even if this injured others? Could the factory-owner say, 'This is my factory and I propose to close it even though this will throw my employees out of work'? This conflict of rights was to shape much of modern history.

In 1791, the king accepted the

constitution. It was formally declared that the revolution was over and that France had become a modern country based on rationalism and the Rights of Man. In practice the Rights of Man were a good deal restricted. Workers were denied the right to form trade unions. The right of the citizen to be represented depended on his property. Only the 'active citizens' - those with property - had a vote. The others were described as passive citizens, an inferior order. In theory universal suffrage was adopted for a few months in 1793, but no election during the French revolution was held on its basis.

From 1789 to 1791 there had been a logical pattern. The leaders of the revolution had clear ideas where they were going. Thereafter events took charge. The peaceful transformation of France into a constitutional country broke down. Louis had never sincerely acquiesced in it. He stirred up the reactionary powers of Europe to intervene in France and they welcomed the opportunity to weaken France or even to partition it.

War hung over France from the beginning of 1792. That summer it provoked the fall of the monarchy. On 10 August, the second vital date in the history of the revolution, Louis's palace - the Tuileries (to which he had moved in October, 1789), was attacked. He took refuge with the Assembly and was formally dethroned. A month later the Republic was proclaimed. The French

were confident that they were preparing a new age and that history would begin again from 19 September, 1792, when the revolutionary Convention met. They dated years from that event: Year I, Year II and so on. Even the names of the months were changed into fancy words implying that it was a hot month or a cold month or a month with flowers. All were symbols that the new France was starting from scratch.

The more practical need was to face the challenge of invasion and this second Revolution was more the offspring of panic than of novel ideas. In September, 1792, there was a blind Terror, the massacre in the prisons, when priests, aristocrats and many others were killed. In January, 1793, Louis XVI himself was executed. There was civil war in the Vendée. Many cities-Lyons, Toulon and others-broke away from the government in Paris, some to restore the monarchy, others to set up a federal system.

The revolutionary government that gradually emerged from the confusion and alarm still claimed to possess democratic principles and to speak for the people. In fact, it was concerned to issue orders to the people. It was a revolutionary dictatorship. All the leaders of the French Revolution-like most leaders of most revolutions-came from the intellectual classes. They were lawyers, journalists, professional men of one kind or another. None were great aristocrats, none were peasants or manual workers. All believed in



Marat is stabbed to death in his bath by Charlotte Cordey.

to sit in the market places and encourage the recruits with patriotic songs. The French treasury had been almost bankrupt before the revolution. The mounting costs of the war made things worse. The Jacobins paid their way with paper money, that is, money they had not got. The result as we all know nowadays was inflation. The revolutionary government answered by the Law of the Maximum, freezing prices and to a lesser extent wages. The Maximum was enforced by Terror. Many of those brought before the Revolutionary Tribunal were there not as traitors or aristocrats, but simply for infringing the Law of the Maximum. There has never been a greater test of the idea that you can get rid of inflation by controlling prices and wages. The attempt failed. Inflation stormed ahead until years later when Bonaparte resolved that the French state should live within its income.

The sight of rich men making profits out of the war and the revolution led Robespierre and his close circle to a new view of virtue. The virtuous citizen was a patriot; he served in the armies; he observed the Law of the Maximum. The very fact of his poverty indicated that he was virtuous, thinking of France and the revolution, not himself. If a citizen was rich, it was clear that he was interested in other things than his public duties. Robespierre and his disciple Saint-Just drew the moral. The poor were virtuous and should therefore be rewarded by a

redistribution of property in their favour. Rich citizens were by definition less virtuous and should be regarded with suspicion, if not actually sent to the guillotine. This doctrine, like the French tricolour, was to make the circuit of the globe.

Robespierre and Saint-Just however had no time to apply their rule of virtue. Many members of the Convention had themselves made money during the war and they overthrew The Incorruptible in order to save their fortunes. In any case the need for revolutionary government was passing. By the summer of 1794, France was beginning to win the war. The national territory had been liberated. The natural frontiers as they were called had been reached. Between 1789 and 1794, France changed from a country with many different outlooks and even languages to a single nation. France had created nationalism. The nation could override tradition and history. Moreover France, as the Great Nation, could override the national claims of others.

Here were the three themes that revolutionary France launched into the world and that have continued to haunt the world ever since. They developed in many different ways. Nevertheless the three revolutionary causes—democracy, nationalism, socialism—all sprang from the fall of the Bastille on 14 July, 1789.

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enlightenment. All quoted from the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The distinction between the moderates and the extremists was one of temperament, not of principle. The extremists or Jacobins as they came to be called were the 'hards', who were prepared to sacrifice anything, including their democratic principles, in order to save France and the revolution. Such Jacobins existed throughout France. They were not a party in the modern sense: there was no formal party organisation. The Jacobins met in their local clubs and they came together because they shared the same 'hard' outlook.

From May, 1793, the Jacobins provided the revolutionary force and were embodied in the Committee of Public Safety, which represented the extreme dictatorship in Paris. They differed a good deal in character and policy. Marat, a journalist who had been for some time a doctor of medicine in London, was a man of violent phrases who demanded an open dictatorship and indeed called for the dictatorship of a revolutionary general. Danton, who had been a man of violence at the time of the massacre in the prisons, regarded violence as a temporary measure and was anxious to restore an earlier life. Although he undoubtedly followed a patriotic line, he also made a modest fortune for himself. Danton did not share the idealism of the extreme Jacobins. When Robespierre spoke about revolutionary virtue, Danton replied, 'The only virtue I know is the one I practise every night with my wife'. Robespierre was shocked. Perhaps this was one of the reasons why he later arranged for Danton to be guillotined.

Robespierre I find difficult to admire. It is impossible to find real greatness in him, yet, because of his passionate faith in the principles of the revolution, he was perhaps its representative man. He was never more than the outstanding speaker of Jacobinism, not the creator of Jacobin policy. He was however the only politician ever known in any country to be called by everyone 'The Incorruptible'. Perhaps this quality was more surprising in France than in some other countries. Robespierre was incorruptible over money. He was corrupted by power. He had spoken against power. He had preached democracy. When he joined the Committee of Public Safety, he abandoned his principles. Though he still espoused the Rights of Man, he declared that these must be suspended until the peace. From June, 1793, until July, 1794, France had a revolutionary government that stopped at nothing in order to conduct first a war of defence and then a war which would carry liberty across Europe. The Convention resolved 'to make Terror the order of the day'.

There was a *levée en masse* by which the theory everyone was conscripted into either the army or the munitions factories, while the aged were instructed