Glossary of French Terms

Ancien Régime. The term is most commonly applied to the way of life and government in France which the 1789 Revolution destroyed.

Armée révolutionnaire. A citizen army of sans-culottes (see below), raised in various regions in the autumn of 1793 and primarily intended to ensure the grain-supply of Paris and other cities.

Bourgeois, bourgeoisie. A generic term more or less synonymous with urban middle classes – bankers, stockbrokers, merchants, large manufacturers, and professional men of every kind.

Brissotins. Followers of Jacques-Pierre Brissot, journalist and deputy for Eure-et-Loire, at the time of the Legislative Assembly. (See also Girondins).

Chouans. Royalist insurgents who took the name from four brothers named Cottereau, known more often as Chouan, a corruption of chat-huant, screech-owl, because they imitated that bird’s cry in order to recognize each other in the woods at night. Three of the four brothers were killed in battle. One brother was active in La Vendée, Brittany and Normandy.

Comités révolutionnaires, or ‘revolutionary’ (or ‘vigilance’) committees. The local committees attached to the Sections (see below) created in April, 1793, and made responsible for police and internal security.

Committee of General Security. One of the two main government committees of the Year II (see below), specifically charged with responsibility for police and internal security.

Committee of Public Safety. The more important of the two leading government committees of the Year II. Generally responsible for the conduct of both internal and external affairs, its powers overlapped with those of the Committee of General Security in police and judicial matters.

Commune. Title given to the Paris local government that emerged at the City Hall (Hôtel de Ville) after the fall of the Bastille. It was to be followed by other communes in the nineteenth century.

Cordeliers Club. The more plebeian, and generally the more radical, of the two major clubs of the Revolution in Paris. The best known leaders were (at various times) Marat, Danton, Hébert, Vincent and Ronson.

Dantonists. Basically, the friends of Danton (e.g. Desmoulins, Legendre, Merlin de Thionville, Fabre d’Eglantine); but, by extension, the term ‘Dantonist’ was also applied to the Indulgents, or opponents of the Terror (e.g. Bourdoif de l’Oise, Delacroix, Thuriot), and certain business-operators (Fabre, Basire, Philippeau), all of whom formed the opposition from the right in the factional crisis of the spring of 1793. (See also Factsions).

Détaude. The 10-day periods into which the Republican 30-day month was divided.

De-christianization. The attack on Christian clergy and religion (both Catholic and Protestant) mounted by Hébert and his supporters (see Hébertists) in the autumn of 1793. It took the form of closing churches, stripping clergy of their vestments and offices and of promoting the cult of the Goddess of Reason. The ‘de-christianizers’ came under government censure after Robespierre’s speech denouncing them on 21 November, 1793.

Emigrés. Nobles, clergy and others who emigrated from France from July, 1789 onwards.

Enragés. Extremist revolutionaries, led by Jacques Roux and Jean Vart, who became a powerful force in Paris in 1793. They were particularly antagonistic to those suspected of hoarding food or speculating.

Estates General (États Généraux). The French national assembly, consisting of representatives of the three orders or estates. These estates elected their deputies and drew up their grievances separately. They also debated separately after the Estates General had assembled. The last meeting of the Estates General before 1789 was in 1614.

Factions. The term applied, in particular, to the two opposing factions of Dantonists (the right) and Hébertists (the left) in the political crisis that reached its climax in March-April, 1793.

Faubourgs. Literally ‘suburbs’, originally, as in Paris, lying outside the old city walls but gradually enclosed within the modern city as it grew. In the Revolution, the term is more particularly applied to the great popular ‘faubourgs’ of Saint-Antoine and Saint-Marcel.

General Wills. Rousseau’s term for the collective will of the community at large.

Girondins. Name originally given, as an alternative to Brissotins (see above), to a group of left-wing deputies in the Legislative Assembly, who supported Brissot’s policy of a ‘revolutionary war’ in the autumn and winter of 1791 and several of whom came from the south-western region of the Gironde. Later applied to a wider group, emanating from the first, who shared a more-or-less common political and social programme in opposition to that of the main body of Jacobins.

Hébertists. A convenient but imprecise term originally applied to the follow-ers and associates of Jacques-René Hébert, editor of Le Père Duchesne. By extension, Hébertism came to be applied to all groups taking part in the left opposition to the Revolutionary Government in the autumn of 1793 and the spring of 1794. (See also Dantonists and ‘Factions’).

Jacobins, Jacobin Club. Name assumed by the members of the former Breton Club when they established themselves in the former Couvent des Jacobins in Paris in October, 1789. The club went through a series of transmutations – through the secession of the Feuillants (June 1791) and the successive purges of Girondins, Dantonists and Hébertists – and ended up in the summer of 1794 as the group within the original Jacobin Club who remained devoted to Robespierre. The Club was dissolved by the Thermidorians in November, 1794. (See also Mountain).

Journée (or journée révolutionnaire). A day of revolutionary struggle in which crowds, generally composed of sans-culottes, participated, e.g. capture of Bastille, overthrow of monarchy, expulsion of Girondin leaders from Convention.

Levee en masse. Law of 23 August, 1793, mobilizing the whole French nation for war.

Livre (or franc). In 1789, roughly equivalent to 1s. 8d. sterling. There were 20 sous to the livre.

Marseillais, La. First called the ‘Chant de guerre pour l’armée du Rhin’ when published at Strasbourg, becoming known by its present title when popularized by the Marseilles fédérés in Paris. It was banned for a time by Napoleon and after the Restoration.

Maximum. There were two laws of the Maximum: that of May, 1793, imposing a limit on the price of grain only; and that of September, 1793, extending price-control to most articles of prime necessity, including labour (maximum des salaires).

Mountain. Name acquired by the Jacobin deputies for Paris, led by Robespierre, who, after their election to the National Convention in September, 1792, sat in the upper seats of the Chamber. By extension, term later applied to similarly-minded deputies from all over France.

National Assembly. The term is here used for each of the successive parliaments of the Revolution: Constituent Assembly (June, 1789 - September, 1791); Legislative Assembly (October, 1791 - August, 1792); National Convention (September, 1792 - October, 1795).

National Guard. Citizens’ army, or militia, originally raised by the Paris districts
Representatives on mission.

Parlements.

their associates on the Committee of Public Safety and Committee of Public Safety.

law) of 1787-8, which served as a cur-

posed by Robespierre, Saint-Just and

impose the policies of the Convention to the provinces, after March, 1793, to

French Revolution.

to the higher clergy) and nobility, on

clergy (though generally applied only
to their judicial functions, the

virtue of the fact. that royal edicts did

acquired great political power by

Aix, Rennes, Pau, Metz, Besançon,

Parlements of Paris, Toulouse,

there were thirteen Parlements

word since their members were not

liaments in the modern sense of the

bourgeois.

The Parlements were not par-

The revolt of the nobili-

Revolution; term in use from August,

1793, and

adopted by the Convention in the law

literally, those who wore trousers and not

knee-breeches), sometimes applied to

it is often maintained that these dues

should properly be described as

seigneurial and not feudal. The

manor) normally consisted of two

or

in the manifold property of which

the second was its distinguishing fea-

ure. In the terminology of the Ancien

Régime, these two kinds of property

were the domaine proche or direct, and

and domaines utiles or movance. The

domaine proche or direct was an area

of land of which the seigneur usually cul-

tivated a part for his own use with

paid labour and let out the rest to ten-

ant farmers or share-croppers. The

domaine utile or movance was an area

inhibited by so-called peasant propri-

etors who were required to render to

the seigneur those payments and ser-

vices known as 'feudal dues'. Since

the seigneurie had existed before the

appearance of specifically feudal institu-

tions, and since the Jacobins so strongly

blasted them, it is often maintained that these dues

should properly be described as

seigneurial and not feudal. The

seigneur was not necessarily a noble.

Long before the eighteenth century,

bourgeois had bought seigneuries. Nor

the noble necessarily a seigneur,

though if he were not, his aim was

always to become one, since this title

was a much prized one.

Sociétés populaires (or sectionnaires).

General term applied to the local

clubs and societies after the summer

of 1791. Many were affiliated to the

Jacobin Club; but, after the 'law of the

40 sous', many, to avoid the Parent-

Club's surveillance, set up indepen-

dently. In consequence, these societies

came to be frowned on by the

Committee of Public Safety; many

were closed down after the fall of

Hébert; more were closed shortly before and shortly after Thermidor; a

few stragglers, however, managed to

survive until the early months of

1795.

Suspects. Persons suspected of harbour-

ing treasonable designs against the

Revolution; term in use from August,

1792 on. Several 'suspects' were

rounded up and gaoled at this time

but there was no general Law

Suspects, entitling such persons to be

arrested and brought before the

Revolutionary Tribunal, until 5

September, 1793. It marked the official

opening of the Terror and filled the

prisons in the months that followed.

Tui de. The principal direct tax paid by all

commoners (roturiers) before the

Revolution, usually levied on personal

income (taille personnelle), more

rarely on land (taille réelle).

Taxation populaire. Reduction of food

prices by riot (examples here given: in

the Orléanais in November-December

1792; in Paris in February, 1793).

Terror. Here used in two senses: 'terror'

(with a small 't') as a mode of compul-

sion, either official or 'popular' (such

as in September Massacres, 1792); and

'Terror' which generally applies to a

period rather than to a method: the

period September, 1793, to July, 1794,

when the Jacobin (or Revolutionary)

Government imposed its authority by

varying means of compulsion – mili-

tary, judicial and economic. Hence,

also, the 'Great Terror' of June-July,

1794.

Thermidor. The month in the

Revolutionary Calendar running from

19 July to 17 August. It applied, in

particular, to the two days in

Thermidor (9th and 10th) of the Year

II, which saw the overthrow of

Robespierre and his associates and

the end of the Revolutionary

Government. Hence, Thermidorians,

i.e. Robespierre's immediate succes-

sors.

Third Estate. Literally, the representatives

of the non-privileged of the three estates

attending the Estates General. More generally, used

to denote all social classes other than

the aristocracy, upper clergy and

wealthy magistrates.

Tricoteuse. A woman who sat and knitted
during the sessions of the Revolution-

ary Tribunal and around the guillo-

tine.

Vende'. A département created in 1789-

90, covering the area of Poitou, south

from the Bay of Bourgneuf to the

mouth of the Vendée at L'Aiguillon-

sur-Mer. La Vendée was the heart from

1793 to 1796 which spread northwards into Britany.

Virtue. Here generally used, as by

Robespierre, in the sense of civic

virtue (e.g. love of country or loyalty

to the Jacobin cause) rather than in

that of private morality or virtuous

conduct in personal relations.

Year II. The second year of the French

Republic, i.e. from 22 September,

1793, to 21 September, 1794. Most

often, as here, applied to the period

of office of the great Committee of

Public Safety (27 July, 1793 - 27 July,

1794).