

5 What caused the French Revolution?

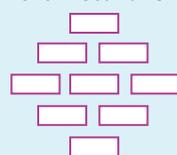
This short chapter brings together the themes developed in Chapters 2–4 and gives the opportunity to discuss the causes of the Revolution. Chapter 2 introduced a range of developments and problems in society that were creating criticisms of the Ancien Régime. Chapter 3 examined the pathway of events that forced Louis to call the Estates-General and Chapter 4 has described how, once the Estates-General met, events moved very swiftly and revolution began. It was, however, still a ‘moderate’ revolution in that the aim of the revolutionaries was to create a constitutional monarchy in which the King retained some degree of power. There was as yet no thought of creating a republic or executing the King.

Enquiry Focus: What caused the French Revolution?

One major component of studying history – and one of its wider values – is exploring and understanding why events take place. We begin by identifying causes or causal factors, then we look to see how they are connected and finally we try to make a judgement on which were the most important. That process is what this task is about.

Royal finances and the failure of financial reforms	Poverty in countryside and towns	The Enlightenment
The American War of Independence	Harvest quality and food prices 1788–89	The rise of the Bourgeois
Resentment over the tax system and corruption	The character and actions of Louis XVI	The decisions of the Assembly of Notables and the Parlement of Paris

- 1 Create your own set of cards with the headings above. Below the heading on each card summarise the part each factor played in the outbreak of revolution. Try to do this in just two or three sentences for each.
To do this use your notes from chapters 2–4, then read this chapter to see whether you wish to add to or amend your summaries.
- 2 What different kinds of categories can you split the cards into?
- 3 What links can you see between any two or more factors?
- 4 Arrange the cards into a pattern (such as the Diamond 9 pattern) to explain why the Revolution broke out. For example, you could place the factor you consider the most important at its tip and the rest arranged below to show their relative importance, and how they are related.
- 5 a) How do you think each of the historians discussed on pages 55–56 would arrange these cards?
b) Why would their patterns differ?

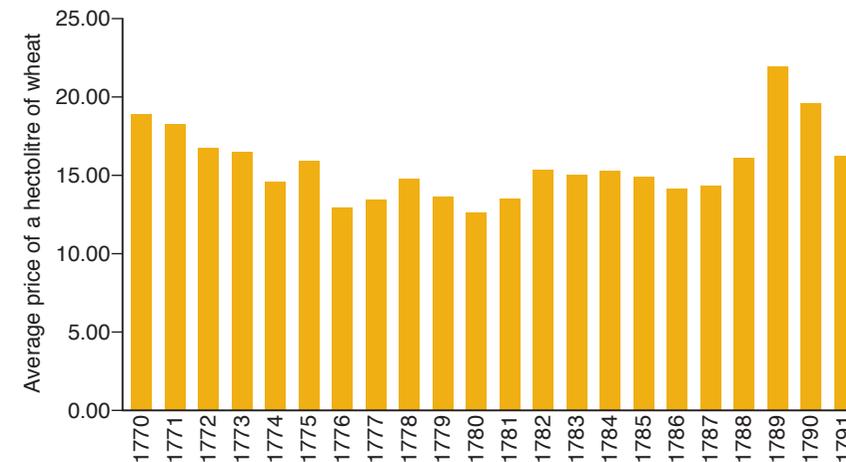


Balancing long- and short-term causes

Why did this revolution begin? Historians have examined a wide range of causes, from the very long-term developments through the eighteenth century to the immediate events of 1789. One example of a longer-term factor is the Enlightenment which has been identified as the starting point for a study of the French Revolution in many history books. To some historians it was one cause of the Revolution; to right wing historians it was the cause. These historians, from Burke onwards, argue that the Ancien Régime was stable and could have continued but that it was undermined by the Enlightenment. The most extreme claim is that the Enlightenment was a plot to promote atheism and anarchy. Other historians have argued that whilst the *philosophes* were certainly critics of the Ancien Régime they were not advocating revolution. There is disagreement amongst historians about how widely read Rousseau’s works were before the Revolution, although some leading revolutionaries, such as Robespierre and Madam Roland, were influenced by his ideas.

At the other end of the argument is the view that the Revolution owed far more to more immediate events – increases in the price of bread, unemployment and hunger. In 1788–89 the price of grain was very high due to a bad harvest and there was a shortage of food. In the towns unemployment was rising because of falling demand for products and wages remained low as the price of bread went up. The winter was a particularly bad one. Most of a labourer’s wages was spent simply on bread with little to spare even for wine to ease life’s hardships. The situation was no better in the countryside where food riots took place in spring 1789 and grain stores were pillaged. But what if there had been good harvests, low food prices and less unemployment – would a revolution have taken place in the same way in 1789?

Somewhere between these extremes of long- and very immediate short-term causes lie a range of factors such as the role of the royal family and Louis XVI in particular. At a time of national crisis decisive leadership was needed but this was something Louis was unable to give. As you have already seen he failed to impress people and was regarded as a figure of fun by the aristocrats at his own court. An incident at the opening of the Estates-General illustrates his lack of presence. After a brief and uninspiring



◁ National average price in livres of a hectolitre of wheat between 1770 and 1791. (From *The Longman Companion to the French Revolution* by Colin Jones, Pearson Education Limited © Longman Group UK Limited 1988.)

opening speech, he doffed his hat as a salute to the assembled deputies. After a royal wave he replaced his hat and then, after a respectful moment, so did the noble deputies. But then so did the Third Estate deputies, either because they had no idea of the correct etiquette that they should not wear a hat in the presence of the King or because they were following the lead of others out to cause trouble. In the confusion that followed some took their hats off again whilst others kept them on. Then Louis took his hat off again. The taking off and putting on of hats turned a solemn ceremonial occasion into a farce.

Moreover, during the opening days and weeks of the Estates-General Louis went through periods of political inactivity, going hunting or drinking instead of meeting ministers. This meant that ministers could do nothing. Some suggest Louis was depressed. Certainly he was disappointed by the failure of the Assembly of Notables and grief stricken by the death of the Dauphin on 4 June. Into the vacuum left by Louis moved the hard-liners in the royal family, his wife Marie Antoinette and his youngest brother the Comte d'Artois. They worked against Necker and any moves to make concessions. They were instrumental in the dismissal of Necker which was to precipitate the events of the 14 July 1789 when the Bastille fell.

Meanwhile, another member of the royal family who you have already met, Philippe, Duc D'Orleans was actively working against Louis but from a different standpoint. At the ceremonial opening of the Estates-General, Orleans deliberately walked amongst the deputies of the Third Estate. His Paris home, the Palais Royal, became a base for the **patriot party**. Orleans funded and protected the journalists and agitators like Desmoulins who attacked Louis' government. Their pamphlets could be published uncensored at his home. As Grand Master of the French Masonic order he was also closely linked to those masonic lodges where politics was discussed. Just how important his role was in bringing revolution is debatable; but that he contributed to it is certain.

These paragraphs have set the scene for the discussion that follows, tracing the ways in which historians have analysed the causes of the French Revolution.

Are you a royalist, a liberal or a Jacobin? Historians and the causes of the French Revolution

The French historian François Furet in his introduction to *Interpreting the French Revolution* (1978) commented that as soon as a historian writes about the French Revolution they are 'labelled a royalist, a liberal or a Jacobin.' He was referring to the heated debates amongst historians about both the causes and the course of the French Revolution. We'll come to the course of the Revolution later but for the moment we will stick with its causes.

The debates about the causes of the Revolution began soon afterwards and still continue. There are a number of reasons for the differing interpretations. To begin with there is the nature of the evidence. Historical evidence is fragmentary, incomplete and sometimes contradictory.

Secondly, there is the methodological approach of the historian. There are different types of evidence that historians can use, such as written or statistical sources, paintings and artefacts; and historians may select from

the extensive range of evidence that survives from the French Revolution. Moreover, historians have different interests and this may lead them to ask different questions. Are they interested in political, social, economic and cultural approaches, issues of gender and class, **history from below**, the use of local history, biography and the role of the individual? And what sort of history do they want to write, narrative or analytical, and for what audience?

Thirdly, there are the historian's own views on human society and the past, and the role of theory, such as Marxism, in their work. And finally, historians do not work in a vacuum. They are influenced by the political, social, economic and cultural climate of their own times.

Initially there were two positions on the French Revolution; those historians on the political right who were against the Revolution and those on the left who were for it. Then the problem of the violence in the Revolution split the latter group into two. The three viewpoints that then resulted are the right or Royalist; the centre or liberal; and the left or Jacobin or Marxist.

To the historians on the political right the Ancien Régime was still stable and viable in 1789. Therefore it was attacked from the outside, by the Enlightenment. At its most extreme this viewpoint saw the Enlightenment as a deliberate plot to overturn the social order, including the Catholic Church. This view became the orthodox position in France when it was ruled by the **Vichy** government, 1940–44. After that government fell and was discredited, so too was this interpretation for a time.

To the historians on the political left the Revolution was all about the heroic people overthrowing the repressive Ancien Régime and establishing a republican and egalitarian regime in its place. The Marxist viewpoint emerged in the twentieth century. The classic Marxist interpretation of the causes of the French Revolution is of a rising bourgeoisie, empowered by an emerging capitalist economy, denied political influence by the landed aristocracy. This school of historians, most notably Georges Lefebvre, developed the view that the Revolution was the result of the newly emerging bourgeoisie who were struggling to gain political power to match their commercial and capitalist power. The growing numbers of rich bourgeois merchants and industrialists therefore challenged both monarchy and aristocracy and in so doing made a revolution. This interpretation was challenged by non Marxist historians in the late 1950s but a modern historian still defending that view is Colin Jones. In *Bourgeois Revolution Revivified: 1789 and Social Change* (1991) he argued that the French economy was growing in the eighteenth century, with commercial trade growing dramatically by as much as 400 per cent and manufacturing more slowly by perhaps 75 per cent. He identified the cities that were strong revolutionary centres such as Paris, Lyons, Bordeaux and Marseilles as being the ones whose economies were growing fastest. And he argued that the increasing number of bourgeoisie resented the power of the old order and that prompted them to rebel.

To historians in the political centre the Revolution was justified by the abuses of the Ancien Régime. As with the left, this viewpoint saw the newly emerging bourgeoisie struggling against the monarchy and aristocracy as the main reason for the Revolution. Both emphasised the social and economic causes of the revolution. Where they differ the most is over the Terror (see page 94). Those on the left see it as necessary to the survival of the Revolution whilst those in the centre explain the Terror as being the Revolution being blown off course.

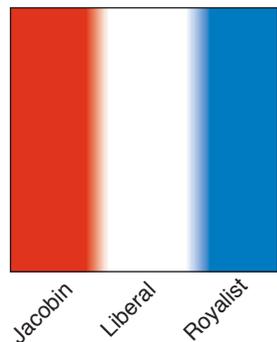
The **'history from below'** approach emphasises the importance of studying the lives and experiences of common people rather than political leaders and 'great men'.

Vichy
The right wing French Government which collaborated with Nazi Germany

patriot party

This was the name for all those who supported the new ideas in 1789

Use the discussion above to revise your factor cards. The absence of discussion of some factors above does not mean they were necessarily less important.



Revisionists

These three positions framed debates about the Revolution until the middle of the twentieth century.

- In 1954 a revisionist interpretation was put forward by Alfred Cobban. He studied the revolutionary deputies in the Estates-General and identified that few of them were bourgeois capitalists. Instead he categorised them as lawyers and office holders and judged that the Revolution did not overthrow feudalism. Instead it was in fact a victory for the 'conservative, propertied, landowning classes'.
- Another historian, George Taylor (1964) made a similar categorisation but reached a different conclusion. He saw the nobles and bourgeoisie as having similar interests and being part of a single elite. But for him the Revolution was an accident that could have been avoided by a more able monarch than Louis. Today this view, that it was not so much a social conflict but more a political accident, is also argued by William Doyle (2002).
- Meanwhile François Furet (1970) argued that the causes were not social, were not a clash between rising bourgeoisie and aristocracy, but rather a constitutional crisis that paralysed the monarchy.

Post revisionists

By the late 1980s the term post revisionist was being used to describe a viewpoint that the Revolution was actually a symptom of deeper trends in French society such as the emergence of public opinion, **desacralisation** of the monarchy or the marginalisation of women in public life. Timothy Tackett (1996) studied the deputies in the Estates-General and argued that the nobility were wealthier and socially more advantaged than the deputies from the Third Estate. However, most nobles were less well educated than the deputies and four-fifths had military experience. So Tackett, whilst disagreeing with the Marxist interpretation, believes that social factors are important and that the nobility and bourgeoisie did not form a single elite.

Micro history

The historian Peter Jones, in his book *Liberty and Locality in Revolutionary France: Six villages compared 1760–1820* (2003), adopted a 'micro history' approach. In the introduction he commented on his methodology, on his choice of these six villages:

'The case studies on which this book is based are not representative, therefore. Yet nor are they palpably unrepresentative. In a context of a little over 40,000 rural parishes at the end of the ancien régime, it would not have made much difference if I had studied sixteen, sixty or six hundred villages'.

He believes his micro approach, studying the detailed lives of all those in the six villages, allows him to generalise on rural society across France. So in terms of looking for long-term economic causes in the evidence of the peasant *cahiers* he argues that the '*cahiers de doléances* are best understood as blurred snapshots of a fleeting moment ...'. As you might expect his view of the Revolution from the perspective of the peasantry at a local level over a 60-year period is going to be very different from that of say Timothy Tackett who studied the deputies in the Estates-General in a single year, 1789.

desacralisation

No longer seen as being sacred

■ Use the discussion of historians' views above to reflect on what you have written on your factor cards and particularly to help you with tasks 4 and 5 on page 52.

The Black Swan

In his book, *The Black Swan* (2007), the essayist and scholar Nassim Nicholas Taleb characterises some events as Black Swans. These are events that could not have been predicted at the time because they are so far outside of expectations. Based on his criteria which are listed below and what you know so far about Ancien Régime France, do you think that the French Revolution could be characterised as a Black Swan?



- The event is a surprise (to the observer).
- The event has a major impact.
- After the event, it is rationalised by hindsight, as if it could have been expected.

Is this the only book I should read?

No! No one book is sufficient to cover any major event in history and this one is no exception. You need to read others. I'd suggest five more history titles:

- *The Longman Companion to the French Revolution* (1988) by Colin Jones has sat on my desk for the past two years. Given a choice between this book or access to the internet to consult on the Revolution whenever I'm unsure about something I would pick this book every time. It contains a fascinating and quite amazingly comprehensive guide to the people and events of the French Revolution and all sorts of useful detail on any subject you can imagine from *abbé* (a title given to all clerics) to *visites domiciliares* (house to house searches for arms and suspects during the Terror).
- *Conspiracy in the French Revolution* (2007) edited by Peter Campbell, Thomas Kaiser and Marisa Linton is a collection of stimulating essays, written by some of the leading academic historians of the French Revolution today and will give you a real flavour of what a dynamic and relevant subject history can be.
- *Oxford History of the French Revolution* (2nd edition 2002) by William Doyle is authoritative, well written and highly detailed.
- *The French Revolution 1787–1804* (2nd edition 2010), by Peter Jones is a very popular undergraduate text. This offers a very succinct account and analysis of what happened and why, and includes a selection of key contemporary documents.
- *A New Dictionary of the French Revolution* by Richard Ballard (2011) is the sort of book you can dip into at any time and emerge with a fascinating snippet of information.

If you would like a fictional introduction to France in 1785 then the Costa Book of the Year 2012 *Pure* by Andrew Miller is an excellent read. One reviewer wrote: 'Reading it, you feel as if you are in Paris before the Revolution, a city at once decaying and on the cusp of momentous change, a place of disgusting smells and odd subcultures, at once recognisable and utterly foreign.'

How did people in Britain react to the Revolution?

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness ... it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair ...

These words come from the opening lines of the most famous novel set during the French Revolution, *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens, published in 1859. They capture both the variety and the extremes of reactions felt by people in Britain to the news of developing events in France.

There were certainly those who saw the early days of the Revolution as 'the best of times'. The scientist Erasmus Darwin wrote to James Watt hailing the dawn of 'universal liberty', saying 'I feel myself becoming all French in chemistry and politics'. The industrialist, Josiah Wedgwood, spoke of 'the wonderful revolution' and set about manufacturing thousands of souvenir pottery medallions to celebrate the fall of the Bastille. The romantic poet William Wordsworth, who visited France in July 1790, wrote in his autobiographical poem *The Prelude*:

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very Heaven!

Politicians too were initially enthusiastic. Charles James Fox declared the Revolution to be 'much the greatest event that ever happened in the world'. The Prime Minister, William Pitt, hoped that the French would, like the British, now live under a constitutional monarchy. To many Britons it seemed that the French were simply catching up with the superior British system of government.

However, as violence increased, critics of the Revolution became more vociferous. In November 1790, an MP, Edmund Burke, published a pamphlet, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, condemning the Revolution. While Burke was not against change and believed that people had the right to depose a despotic government he criticised the developing violence and argued for gradual change by constitutional means and for the protection of property and the Church. He believed the Revolution was the result of a conspiracy by the 'moneyed interest' anxious to gain status and profits and more importantly by philosophers of the Enlightenment committed to destroying Christianity. He warned that a political doctrine founded upon abstract ideas such as liberty and the rights of man could easily be abused to justify tyranny. He predicted that:

... some popular general, who understands the art of conciliating the soldiery, and who possesses the true spirit of command, shall draw the eyes of all men upon himself. Armies will obey him on his personal account ... the moment in which that event shall happen, the person who really commands the army is your master.

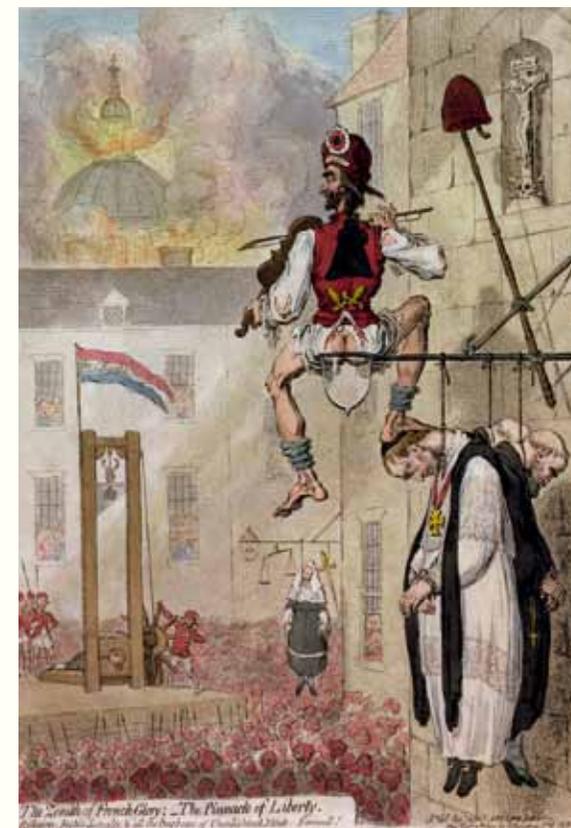
Burke may have been thinking of Lafayette but his prediction came true when Napoleon seized power in 1799.

Burke's pamphlet, a best seller, sold 30,000 copies in two years but sparked a number of responses, most famously *The Rights of Man* by Thomas Paine in 1791. Paine played down Burke's criticisms of the savagery of the Revolution by giving a precise account of the storming of the Bastille and the October Days and highlighting the achievement of the revolutionaries in drawing up the Rights of Man and Citizen. He argued that the British should follow suit and abolish nobility, titles and the monarchy. Sales of this pamphlet were even more spectacular, about 200,000. Stimulated by events in France and by Paine's arguments, reform clubs sprang up across Britain, campaigning for political reforms which would create a fairer electoral system including giving ordinary working men the vote.

These two pamphlets represented the diversity of reactions captured by Dickens in *A Tale of Two Cities*. On one side, encouraged by the ideals of the Revolution (though not by the violence) were those who wanted political change in Britain. On the other side were the reactionaries who opposed change and feared that even peaceful protests were the beginning of revolution and widespread blood-letting. The outbreak of war between Britain and France in 1793 increased this fear and led to the government banning public meetings of more than 50 people and the arrest and transportation of some reform club leaders.

This debate between those who saw the Revolution as a time of hope and those who saw it as reason to despair continued in Britain for the next 30 years and beyond. Whenever ordinary people marched to demand the right to vote (as at Peterloo in 1819 or during the Reform crisis of 1830–31), the government sent in soldiers to break up the protests on the grounds that this was preventing a revolution. Therefore, the influence of the French Revolution on Britain did not end in 1798 or 1815 but continued to reverberate through British politics throughout the first half of the 1800s.

- ▷ *The Zenith of French Glory: the Pinnacle of Liberty, Religion, Justice, Loyalty & all the bugbears of Unenlightened Minds Farewell!* by James Gillray, etching with hand colouring, 1793. Once war broke out between France and Britain, the characterisation of the French revolutionaries as bloodthirsty savages gained ground. Here Gillray shows the *sans-culotte* sitting on a lamp bracket, his foot on the head of one of the hanging churchmen. He fiddles whilst in the background Louis XVI is guillotined. The watching crowd are shown with revolutionary bonnets.



Revolutionary changes

1. Who was governing France from 1790?

Louis XVI remained King until his deposition in August 1792.

Between 1789 and 1795 there were three representative assemblies. These were:

- 1 The **Estates-General** which first assembled on 5 May 1789. This later renamed itself the **National (Constituent) Assembly** and sat until 30 September 1791. Its deputies were originally interested in making reforms to the existing political system, that is the monarchy, but became more radical as events unfolded.
- 2 Following elections in 1791 the **Legislative Assembly** assembled on 1 October 1791 and sat until 20 September 1792. Its deputies were divided between those who wanted a constitutional monarchy to work and those who did not.

Louis was deposed as King by the *journée* of 10 August 1792. There was then a period of transition lasting until 20 September 1792 when power was in the hands of three groups – the Legislative Assembly, the Provisional Executive Council and the Insurrectionist Committee or Commune.

The **Provisional Executive Council** was a provisional form of government with six ministers headed by Danton, who was Minister for Justice, and Roland who was Minister for the Interior.

The **Insurrectionist Committee** or **Commune** was the committee, dominated by the *sans-culottes*, that plotted and carried out the overthrow of the monarchy.

- 3 This period of transition ended with the third representative assembly, the **National Convention**, which first assembled on 20 September 1792 and stayed sitting until 26 October 1795. The deputies elected to this body were committed to the new republic. During this period a key group at the centre of government was the Committee of Public Safety led by Robespierre.

From November 1795 to November 1799 France was governed by the Directory, a moderate democratic government, steering a middle way between a reintroduction of the monarchy on the right and the introduction of a popular democracy on the left. The National Convention continued as the elected legislature.

In November 1799 the Directory was overthrown by Napoleon Bonaparte (the head of the army, see page 122). Napoleon now ruled France and within two years was elected Consul for life.

Estates-General became:

- **National (Constituent) Assembly** from 1789–September 1791
- **Legislative Assembly** from October 1791–September 1792
- **National Convention** from September 1792–October 1795

2. What were the main political groups between 1790 and 1795?

The range of revolutionary groups can appear complex as people's views changed as the Revolution progressed and so men and women left one group to join another. That said, we can crudely divide people up into three main political groups – the **Feuillants**, the **Girondins**, and the **Jacobins**.

The **Feuillants** group were constitutional royalists. Amongst its leading figures were Barnave and Lafayette. They wanted to make constitutional monarchy work and were in control of the National Assembly in August and September 1791 and influential until early 1792.

The **Girondins** group can be loosely described as more moderate revolutionaries. They came to be known as Girondins because some of the deputies in the group represented the Gironde department of France. Amongst its leading figures were Brissot and the Rolands. They were pro war, in favour of a republic, and very influential in the National Convention until they were purged in the *journée* of 2 June 1793 by their enemies, the Jacobins.

Both the Feuillants and Girondins were originally **Jacobins** but they left (or were expelled). The remaining group of Jacobins can be loosely described as more extreme revolutionaries who demanded the execution of Louis XVI to safeguard the Republic. They were also known as Montagnards (see page 79). Amongst its leading figures were Danton and Robespierre. They held power from 1793 until the overthrow of Robespierre in the Thermidor Coup.

Two smaller but also significant groups were the Hébertists and the Dantonists (or Indulgents).

The **Hébertists** were a left wing group gathered around the journalist Jacques-René Hébert who opposed the revolutionary government of the Committee of Public Safety and who agitated for greater social and economic reforms, an increase in the Terror and for de-Christianisation. They were guillotined in March 1794.

The **Dantonists** was the name given to the group guillotined with Danton on 5 April 1794 who had been calling for an end to the Terror.

3. The Revolutionary Calendar

As part of its break from the past, the National Convention voted on 5 October 1793 to adopt a new revolutionary calendar. This was backdated to begin with Year I of the new Republican era on 22 September 1792, the day after the abolition of the monarchy. The year was divided into 12 months, each of 30 days which were in turn divided into 10-day weeks, the final day of which would be a day of rest. The five supplementary days became known as *sans-culotides* and were national holidays. This calendar was a deliberate rejection of the Christian calendar and ignored Sundays and saints' days. Robespierre opposed this, believing that de-Christianisation alienated people from the Revolution. He wrote in his private notebook, 'indefinite adjournment of the decree on the new calendar'. Nevertheless it was passed and put into action, although it proved impossible to completely stamp out

the observance of Sundays. The calendar survived until December 1805, when it was abolished by Napoleon.

Month	Meaning	Began
Vendémiaire	vintage	22 September 1792
Brumaire	mist	22 October
Frimaire	frost	21 November
Nivôse	snow	21 December
Pluviôse	rain	20 January 1793
Ventôse	wind	19 February
Germinal	seeds	21 March
Floréal	flowers	20 April
Prairial	meadows	20 May
Messidor	harvest	19 June
Thermidor	heat	19 July
Fructidor	fruit	18 August