

**Popular Sovereignty and Political Unrest:
The Instability of Power and Leadership during the French Revolution 1789–1799**

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The French Revolution (1789–1799) was a time of great political and civil unrest in France. Many citizens were unhappy with the way King Louis XVI was leading the country, and they wanted change. There were many different views about the approaches to the way in which change should be accomplished as evidenced by personal narratives from this time period. For some, the driving values at the beginning of the Revolution seemed to contradict the values that were present at the end of it. Why did power appear to shift so easily throughout the French Revolution? Evidence shows that power was so fluid because the “people,” not one specific group or person, controlled the French Revolution. The conflicting nature of the French Revolution exemplifies the ease with which those in power can lose control of the people over whom they preside.

Before the Revolution began, King Louis XVI had a tenuous grasp over the country. His authority was weakening by the day as people from the Third Estate cried out for change. The Third Estate was comprised of many different peoples, including the lower classes, but the middle class, known as the *bourgeoisie*, were one of the main drivers of the French Revolution. The bourgeoisie were tired of the King and the First and Second Estates arguing over what to do rather than actually doing something. As George Lefebvre claims in his book, *The French Revolution from 1793 to 1799*, “the bourgeoisie put an end to the contradiction by seizing the state themselves.”¹ The bourgeoisie wanted results, and the only way they believed this could be achieved was by changing who held the power. This seizure marked the beginning of the Revolution and the decline and eventual loss of power of King Louis XVI. The bourgeoisie were tired of inaction, so they took matters into their own hands and set the Revolution on a path of continual attempts to gain control of the movement.

Despite continual efforts to control the Revolution, according to Lefebvre, the bourgeoisie “did not succeed in establishing a true government.”² This speaks to the lack of authority that would preside over the Revolution for the next ten years. Attempts were made to establish some semblance of government, which can be seen in the creation of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* (1789). According to Kevin Reilly in *World’s History*, “the source of all sovereignty resides essentially in the nation; no group, no individual may exercise authority not emanating expressly therefrom.”³ The Revolution’s leading document has a provision which

¹ Georges Lefebvre, *The French Revolution from 1793 to 1799*, trans. John Hall Stewart and James Friguglietti (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), 269.

² Lefebvre, *The French Revolution from 1793 to 1799*, trans. Stewart and Friguglietti, 271.

³ Kevin Reilly, “The French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, 1789,” in *World’s History*, ed. Kevin Reilly, vol. 2: *Since 1400*, 7th ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2020), 680.

explicitly states that control over the people cannot occur without the people's consent.⁴ This makes it difficult for a leading group to take control of the Revolution because they would have to acquire the permission and support of the public to do so. Some people were able to gain power for a time, such as the Marquis de Lafayette, who advocated heavily for the people. Even at the beginning of its conception, people realized the important impacts the declaration would have on society; this was evidenced by observers who claimed "we were in time to hear La Fayette [sic] make the motion for a declaration of rights, which will probably be considered one of the most prominent events in this revolution."⁵ People realized the weight that such a document would carry and that its purpose was to protect their rights. Popular sovereignty empowers people to feel like they have control over their own country, though this can have explosive consequences. Everyone wants to be heard and taken seriously. In the French Revolution, the idea of popular sovereignty led to constant shifts in power. No one person was ever able to take charge.

During the Revolution, two main political groups emerged: the Jacobins and the Girondins. In the beginning, these two groups believed in the same thing, freedom for France. As Madame Roland (1754–1793), a leader of the Girondin movement, stated in her memoirs while she was in prison awaiting execution, "I was passionate for the Revolution. I thought that the Constitution, whatever its faults, must be made to work."⁶ This illustrates how, in the beginning, the Girondins believed in the Revolution's goals and were convinced that it would be successful. They helped create, along with the Jacobins, a temporary political system under which the Revolution could function. According to Jeremy Popkin in his book *A Short History of the French Revolution*, as the Revolution became more bloody and violent, "membership in the Jacobins was opened up to poorer citizens, the club network supported increasingly radical policies."⁷ These radical policies ultimately drove a wedge between the Girondins and the Jacobins, foreshadowing the bloody, violent events that would come to define the Revolution's Reign of Terror.

As the Revolution increasingly took on a more radical character, the divide between the Girondins and Jacobins increased and became more hostile. The conflict between these two groups was felt by people in France. For example, an anonymous source in J. M. Thompson's collection, *English Witnesses of the French Revolution*, stated, "the Girondins have to-day all the power of

⁴ Marquis de Lafayette, "The French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, 1789," in *World's History*, ed. Reilly, 680.

⁵ Edward Rigby, "Crisis at Versailles" from *English Witnesses of the French Revolution*, ed. by J. M. Thompson (New York: Kennikat Press, 1970), 47.

⁶ Madame Roland, "First Term of Office," in *The Memoirs of Madame Roland: A Heroine of the French Revolution*, trans. and ed. by Evelyn Shuckburgh (New York: Moyer Bell Limited, 1990), 89.

⁷ Jeremy D. Popkin, *A Short History of the French Revolution*, 3rd ed. (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 2002), 55.

the Convention in their hands, but Paris, with its sections and Jacobins, will in the end triumph. Blood and massacre will be the result of their success.”⁸ This demonstrates the fact that the Jacobin movement often took on more violent characteristics, which was in direct contradiction to the Girondin’s call for more conservative measures. The Girondins, who were once seen as the leading group in the Revolution, lost their power over the people whose actions were becoming increasingly violent. This again exemplifies the importance of the people’s support for those who want to control the political power.

Even when it seemed that the Jacobins would now be the leaders of the Revolution, their power over the people was never solidified. The Jacobins may have seized power in the Assembly, but according to Popkin, “the violence that had resulted in the lynching of the Bastille’s commander . . . showed that the revolutionary process could easily get out of the assembly’s control.”⁹ The Jacobins were at the mercy of the people of France. They only had power so long as they answered to the people’s will. The people were gaining a heightened sense of agency though; they were realizing that they had the power to choose who they wanted to represent them. This led to the people deciding when the power would change hands. For example, the people believed in the Jacobin movement and its leaders, one of which was Maximilien Robespierre, in the beginning. Robespierre was “*in his heart* Republican . . . upon this principle he acts, and the public voice is decidedly in favour of this system.”¹⁰ Robespierre was seen as reflecting the will of the people, which is what kept him in power, but as soon as he deviated from the people’s wishes, he lost his power and eventually his life to the guillotine. The people decided his fate in the end. According to Robert Strayer and Eric Nelson in *Ways of the World*, the French Revolution was “a profound social upheaval” in which people as a whole led the Revolution, not just a specific group.¹¹ This highlights the true essence of the Revolution, which put the people at its heart. According to J. M. Thompson, it was a Revolution brought on by the people in their entirety, “without the people being led on by any leader, or by any party, but merely by the general diffusion of reason and philosophy.”¹² It is hard for a group to establish dominance over a people who are used to getting actions accomplished without someone telling them what to do or how to act.

⁸ “The Fall of the Girondins,” in *English Witnesses of the French Revolution*, ed. J. M. Thompson (New York: Kennikat Press, 1970), 239.

⁹ Popkin, *A Short History of the French Revolution*, 37.

¹⁰ W. A. Miles, “Robespierre,” in *English Witnesses of the French Revolution*, ed. Thompson, 106.

¹¹ Robert Strayer and Eric Nelson, “The French Revolution, 1789–1815,” in *Ways of the World*, vol. 2: *Since the Fifteenth Century*, 4th ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2019), 699.

¹² “A Bloodless Revolution,” in *English Witnesses of the French Revolution*, ed. Thompson, 61.

Furthermore, it was the people's independent will, along with a Jacobin-led assembly, that led to the change in the Revolution from its moderate course with minimal bloodshed towards a violent path. The French Minister of Justice, Étienne-Louis-Hector Dejoly, claimed that Paris "presented the horrible spectacle of a city taken by assault."¹³ People were using violence in order to try to protect the Revolution and keep Paris under their control. Peaceful measures were seen as ineffective since violence seemed to create results much quicker. Paris was the main stage for this violence, but it was not the only part of the country plagued by violence. According to Paul Hanson, the "revolutionary politics touched the countryside as well" and led to peasant revolts.¹⁴ This shows that even though the majority of the violence was contained to the city, no part of the country was exempt from the consequences of the Revolution. No single group could maintain control over that radical turn.

The French Revolution was a time of great social unrest combined with violent tendencies. Groups were constantly trying to gain control of the movement. The power that people gained was tenuous and could easily shift with the people's will. The bourgeoisie were not set in the way they wanted to achieve change; this led to both periods of violence and tranquility. Both Popkin and Hanson noted the way the Revolution took on more violent characteristics once the power had changed hands. As this shift occurred, the way in which those leaders ruled changed as well; some sought the use of violence while others attempted more peaceful methods. King Louis XVI lost power when the bourgeoisie no longer deemed him capable of leading the country. The Girondins lost power when the Jacobins, who seemed to reflect the Revolutionaries' more violent tendencies, were backed by the bourgeoisie. The Jacobins lost power when they lost the favor of the bourgeoisie. The French Revolution was time and time again shown as a movement where the power of those in charge was easily lost when the bourgeoisie decided change was necessary. Because the French Revolution was marked with episodes of turmoil and unpredictability, the instability of power and leadership was its one constant, defining feature.

¹³ Etienne-Louis-Hector Dejoly, "The Narrative by the Minister of Justice," in *The French Revolution*, ed. Philip Dawson (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1967), 118.

¹⁴ Paul R Hanson, "Political History of the French Revolution since 1989," *Journal of Social History*, vol. 52, no. 3 (2019): 584–592.

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