

Radicalism and Danger

The Reign of Terror began in France in September of 1793. For roughly nine months, the ruling faction of the revolutionary government executed all potential enemies without regard to age, gender, or social status. In the last six weeks of the Terror alone, nearly 1,400 people were guillotined in Paris. At nearly the same time, the French government declared war on the British Empire. These two happenings—the incredible show of violence and the declaration of war on an international global scale—put Britain on the defensive. Many Britons felt that the radicalism and danger of the French Revolution could soon have devastating effects on home shores.

Initially, the core principles that buttressed the French revolutionary movement had wide appeal among Britons. For those in the upper echelons of British society, France appeared to be moving away from an autocratic, feudal order toward a constitutional monarchy that closely resembled the British model. For those in the middling classes, especially those who embraced domestic socio-political reform, the French Revolution was a model. To those Englishmen agitating under outdated constituency boundaries (dubbed “rotten boroughs”) and restricted suffrage, the achievements of the French revolutionaries, by contrast, seemed liberal and universalizing.

Many British liberals welcomed the French Revolution because, at least initially, it represented the triumph of reason over superstition and privilege. In fact, many Britons saw traces of their Glorious Revolution of 1688 in the “Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity” slogans promulgated by the French revolutionaries in 1789. British radicals, including Thomas Paine and William Blake, embraced France’s revolutionary actions. In a November 1789 sermon, Richard Price articulated progressive British interpretations of the Revolution when he preached: “Behold all ye friends of freedom ... behold the light you have struck out, after setting America free, reflected to France and there kindled into a blaze that lays despotism in ashes and warms and illuminates Europe. I see the ardour for liberty catching and spreading ... the dominion of kings changed for the dominion of laws, and the dominion of priests giving way to the dominion of reason and conscience.”

Support for the French revolutionary cause touched off an immense political debate within Britain. In 1791, the conservative Whig politician Edmund Burke wrote an influential pamphlet, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, in which he argued that the events across the English Channel would destroy French civilization and spark a European war. Hundreds of pamphleteers responded to Burke’s diatribe, including Thomas Paine, Mary Wollstonecraft, and James Mackintosh, all of whom argued in favor of the inclusionary, democratic vision of French revolutionaries. The controversy also encouraged the formation of political reform societies in metropolitan and provincial areas. But for many decades, the standoff between radicals and conservatives continued across Europe.

The British government did not sit idly as the debate over the French Revolution escalated. The potential anarchy that might have been unleashed was a very real threat to the established order in Britain. As a result, Parliament passed a number of restrictive and undemocratic laws to avoid a revolution at home. In 1792, the

government denounced seditious writing, including Paine's *Rights of Man*. The situation became increasingly dire after the French promised armed support to all subject peoples. Fears of a popular insurrection rippled across London and reform society members agitated for popular support of political reform. The greatest threat of violence lay in Ireland, however, where a full-scale insurrection broke out in 1798, fueled by the promise of the arrival of French invasion forces. Although the Irish uprising was defeated, radicalism remained a tangible threat. As a result, Parliament suspended *habeas corpus* and passed the Two Acts (1795), which tightened the treason statute and prohibited large public meetings. While widespread protest against such acts emerged, the popular movement was eventually driven underground.

The liberal French revolutionary ideology that had appealed to so many Britons was successfully suppressed or re-directed by British politicians. Napoleon's rise to power and the global war with France, which intensified in the latter 1790s, encouraged anti-French sentiment and engendered a broad wave of nationalistic fervor in Britain. The British political reform movement, initially in the hands of populist reform societies in the early 1790s, was wrested away by Whig politicians who re-made the movement as their own when they effected a limited Reform Bill in 1832.