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Revolutionary war



French citizens rallying to volunteer for war service

The events of 1792, especially armed conflict with foreign powers, radicalised the new regime in France. War broke out for several reasons: the numbers of emigres leaving France increased markedly in 1791-92; they gathered private armies outside France and petitioned European leaders to intervene in order to protect the monarchy. The king himself also believed that war would lead to the collapse of the new regime and the restoration of his own power. The moderate leader Lafayette also wanted war, thinking that it may increase his own prestige and strengthen the position of the king, whom he desired to see ruling as a constitutional monarch. The more radical revolutionaries favoured the idea of 'exporting' the revolution to other nations to topple other monarchies; an expression by the National Assembly stated that revolution was an international process and all people, French and otherwise, had the right to self-determination. Meanwhile European leaders, looked at the events in France with a curious mixture of interest, scorn, disgust and fear.

"According to convention, France went to war in 1792 in a bid to save the Revolution by exporting her principles to the rest of Europe. In reality, such an explanation is at the very least inadequate... nothing was easier for the Brissotins [Girondins] than to cultivate a war they believed would republicanise France, redoubled by the belief that the ancien regime's armies would flee in terror, that war could be restricted to Austria alone, and that a war would ease France's numerous economic problems."

Charles J. Esdaile

The Declaration of Pillnitz (August 1791) was the first implied threat of war against the new regime, issued jointly by the rulers of Austria and Prussia; however it was essentially baseless and did not cause much concern to the revolutionaries. Still, the push for war escalated within France, fuelled mainly by Lafayette, the assemblyman Brissot and the Girondins. Most deputies in the Legislative Assembly were convinced by the arguments that were put forward for war — except Robespierre, who argued against it quite passionately, saying: "the only way to save the state and to safeguard freedom is to wage war in the right way, on our enemies at home, instead of marching under their orders..." Changes in domestic and foreign leadership led the Convention to declare war against Austria in April 1792. The move was initially disastrous: France's military forces, poorly supplied and weakened by desertions, were routed in the first months of battle. In July, Prussia also joined the war against France. Austro-Prussian forces invaded and headed towards Paris, as their commander issued the Brunswick Manifesto, pledging the destruction of the city if any harm came to the royal family. It seemed the decision to declare war had been a costly mistake.

While the imminent threat to Paris should have terrified its citizens, it actually enraged them and radicalised them further. In response to the Legislative Assembly's catchcry of *la patrie en danger* ('the fatherland in danger') there was a rush of enlistments. Inside Paris, sans culottes overthrew the Commune that had been formed in 1789, establishing a new 'revolutionary' Commune. The king became a focus for anger as a revolutionary militia marched on the Tuileries, resulting in one of the most bloodthirsty episodes of the revolution.



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