

2020

## Mobs in the French Revolution

Julia Thompson

La Salle University, [thompsonj34@lasalle.edu](mailto:thompsonj34@lasalle.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/the\\_histories](https://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/the_histories)



Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Thompson, Julia (2020) "Mobs in the French Revolution," *The Histories*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: [https://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/the\\_histories/vol16/iss1/9](https://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/the_histories/vol16/iss1/9)

This Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Scholarship at La Salle University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Histories by an authorized editor of La Salle University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [careyc@lasalle.edu](mailto:careyc@lasalle.edu).

## Mobs in the French Revolution

By Julia Thompson

The French Revolution is a major historic event that witnessed a lot of violence and change. It was a brutal and bloody event that, at times, escalated beyond proportion. The violence that was endured is notable and can be attributed to multiple factors. There were incredibly radical views on all sides and while some also tried to remain in the middle, this behavior only made those on either side upset. Everyone seemed to be steadfast in their views on where the country should go, and rash actions can be seen as a result of the stubbornness. One violent and unprecedented act was the execution of the reigning king and his queen. There were many deaths of the French people, common and noble alike, that greatly impacted the French revolution. With all of the executions occurring, fear was instilled in the people of France. Mobs formed and shifted throughout the French Revolution and the mob mentality became a main component of the revolution. Mob mentality is a psychological concept that explores the power of society and people's peers.<sup>1</sup> Mob mentality is what happens when individuals are influenced by their peers' behaviors, actions, and ideas.<sup>2</sup> This thought process is typically much more emotional than rational.<sup>3</sup> It leads people to make different decisions than they would have individually. The mob mentality typically tends to escalate events into out of control riots and acts of violence. Mob mentality involves a lot of persuasion by a major group on one individual. An overwhelming amount of people pressuring one individual is more than enough to bring them to make decisions and perform actions they normally would not do alone. In the context of the

---

<sup>1</sup> John Drury, *When the Mobs Are Looking for Witches to Burn, Nobodys Safe: Talking about the Reactionary Crowd* (Discourse & Society 2002), 47

<sup>2</sup> Drury, 47

<sup>3</sup> Drury, 47

French Revolution, the mobs that formed played a major role in the decision making and who would lead the country. Those who had the most support had a much bigger say as to what change was going to happen. The mobs themselves also had a voice and represented themselves. They voiced their opinions regardless of the circumstances which lead to some good and bad outcomes throughout the revolution. The people who tried to lead France and were involved in the making of a new government were reliant on the mobs for support.<sup>4</sup> This encouraged mobs to form and increased the drive for wanting to join a mob. By joining a big group of people, individuals were able to feel a sense of comfort because they found people to agree with and help them maintain stability in the uncertain times they were dealing with. Although these mobs had some upsides, they also greatly increased the chances of violent outbreaks and encouraged violent actions. Mobs increased the violence in the French Revolution and their popularity can be attributed to people feeling they needed to belong, people encouraging the formation of mobs, and fear driving people's actions.

The French Revolution was a time of radical and intense changes throughout all aspects of society that had the potential to greatly change people's lives. Change can be very intimidating for many, especially if one is left alone and has to deal with the changes alone. With this in mind, it makes sense that people looked for others in similar situations, or had similar views, or were just close by, so that they could have at least a few people to lean on when things became more difficult. Many people ended up joining groups based on people's beliefs for what they thought should, or should not, happen in the revolution. Some examples of different groups people joined were Jacobins, Feuillants, and Dantonists. These were not the only groups, but they were some of the biggest contributors that many people could flock to. Joining a group

---

<sup>4</sup> Isaac Ariail Reed, *Power and the French Revolution: Toward a Sociology of Sovereignty* (Historická Sociologie 2018), 54

benefited the individual because it provided them with a sense of stability, comfort, and a feeling of belonging to something bigger than themselves.<sup>5</sup> People within the groups were able to support each other, and, even if the group was suppressed by others, they still had one another to fight against the suppression together. These groups also offered security to an individual because, when someone was left alone and did not join a group, it was typically taken as “if you’re not with us you’re against us” in the minds of the mobs.<sup>6</sup> Whether someone was for or against the revolution, in any sense of the words, belonging to a group gave security to a person because they had people who would fight for them and protect them.<sup>7</sup> Speaking out for yourself with no group to support you was very risky because of the volatile times in the country. Although these groups did offer support for individuals who agreed with them, they were a force to be reckoned with if one dared to oppose them. If one did oppose a group, it was commonly seen as going against the people themselves and against the betterment of France.<sup>8</sup> This was a dangerous situation to be in because, even though everyone wants to be a part of improving France, those who did not agree took it to a new level and violence would break out.<sup>9</sup> The leaders of these groups had an immense influence over the people that followed them. The people just wanted others to identify with and be able to give and take support from. This was provided in these groups, but with the groups came an unwavering fear to be left out or alone. The groups provided a strong front against those who opposed them. The unwavering support led to people taking drastic measures to gain supporters or defeat those who stood in the way of what they

---

<sup>5</sup> M. Alpaugh, *A Self-Defining ‘Bourgeoisie’ in the Early French Revolution: The Milice Bourgeoise, the Bastille Days of 1789, and Their Aftermath* (Journal of Social History 2014), 708-09

<sup>6</sup> Charles A. Ellwood, *A Psychological Theory of Revolutions* (American Journal of Sociology 1905), 54

<sup>7</sup> Alpaugh, 709

<sup>8</sup> Brian C.J. Singer, *Violence in the French Revolution: Forms of Ingestion/ Forms of Expulsion* (Social Research 1989), 275

<sup>9</sup> Ellwood, 54

believed to be a better life for themselves and a better France. The violence grew as mobs grew and people were constantly encouraged to pick sides.

The main figures of the French Revolution spouted their views and ideas and formed a following of people who agreed with them. Whether they were for or against the revolution, in this instance, does not matter. Without support of the masses of people, the cause they chose to fight for would fall by the wayside. The leaders understood that they needed a mob and a following in order to further their movement and gain attention. By forming a huge following the leaders would be able to show they had the support of the people and that their opinions and ideas should be heard. These mobs themselves then had the power to push the system one way or another.<sup>10</sup> The encouragement the leaders gave to form these followings led them to continue to grow in many parts of France.<sup>11</sup> Although this sounds like something good for the people of France, it comes with a lot of “picking sides” which could lead to outbursts of verbal or physical fights. Many different groups that formed during the French Revolution reached many different places and gained a lot of support, but encouraging these people to band together for one cause increased in complacent ideology.<sup>12</sup> The people in the mobs, once they found something to follow, would dedicate themselves to the cause at all costs. They would do this because, as previously mentioned, they needed to feel protected, supported, and like they were not alone in the chaos of the changes that were happening. The mobs did indeed help the leaders they chose to follow express their opinion and push their ideas into a new French Government, but it also came with violence between the masses that formed for different followings.<sup>13</sup> Leaders

---

<sup>10</sup> Drury, 41

<sup>11</sup> Ellwood, 55

<sup>12</sup> Ellwood, 55

<sup>13</sup> Singer, 265

encouraged mobs, which led to an increase of violence between those who remained as individuals and the different groups that followed other leaders.

People's need to belong and the encouragement of mobs both played a huge part of the French Revolution: fear. Fear was ever-present in the revolution because it allowed for certain people to take control, and once they had it, they were able to suppress anyone who opposed them. A powerful tool that was used for suppression and persuasion was the guillotine. A specific instance where the guillotine was truly used to instill fear was during The Reign of Terror. At this time, Robespierre climbed to power with help from the massive following he gained, and then he continued to stay in power with the help of his followers and the fear he imposed with use of the guillotine. By using the guillotine as a weapon against those who opposed him, Robespierre was able to suppress their ideas and continue to express his own to the masses.<sup>14</sup> During the revolution, on Robespierre's request, King Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, the King and Queen of France themselves, were executed.<sup>15</sup> Their execution was a major spectacle that attracted the masses. So many gathered to watch the executions that people climbed statues at La Plaza De Revolution in order to try and get to watch the execution of their queen.<sup>16</sup> Since the King and Queen were executed, it showed that no one was safe from the blade of the guillotine. It forced everyone to watch their back and join groups in order to try and protect themselves. The fear the guillotine brought to people's lives further encouraged people to join with the masses either in support of or against the revolution. Those who were for the revolution and Robespierre were driven to extremes to protect themselves by turning others in, joining with the masses, and forcefully defending their position so that they wouldn't be at risk

---

<sup>14</sup> Reed, 62

<sup>15</sup> Reed, 51

<sup>16</sup> Antoine-Jean Duclos, *Journee du 16 octobre 1793, la morte de Marie-Antoinette* (University of California)

for getting guillotined themselves.<sup>17</sup> This left those who were against the revolution and Robespierre to hide their true opinions from the public. Many people sought out groups that had similar views in an effort to protect themselves from succumbing to Robespierre and becoming another victim in The Reign of Terror. Although this fear was powerful, it did not discourage everyone from speaking out. Charlotte Corday was part of the masses who stood against the popular views of her time. She continued to stand her ground and acted out in an attempt to bring attention to the injustices she thought were occurring at the time.<sup>18</sup> To do this she went to meet with Jean-Paul Marat and killed him.<sup>19</sup> She knew what could happen with the actions she took, but did them nonetheless. Her actions raised attention about the consequences of standing against popular opinion. Corday was executed when she was caught, and, even though it showed the power of the guillotine, it also showed that people could make a statement for what they believed in even though the leaders continued to try and suppress the ideas that stood against them. Fear played a huge role in the revolution and forced people to conform to one idea or another. If people strongly opposed, they were forced to find groups that agreed with them in order to try and protect themselves. People were scared of dying, so they sent others to their deaths instead. It was a horrid situation, but the mob's violence increased because of the fears that were implemented on them. The masses were powerful and, the more people that banded together, the “stronger” the idea they were supporting seemed.

There were many causes for violence in the revolution, but mobs themselves increased the violence because if one person has support, they are willing to do more than they would do by themselves. The French Revolution itself was a very volatile time in history that impacted

---

<sup>17</sup> Censer, 386

<sup>18</sup> *Charlotte Corday* (Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia), 1

<sup>19</sup> *Charlotte Corday*, 1

everyone in society from the first estate down to the third estate. The mob violence seen in the revolution was unprecedented for its time. The need for people to feel as if they belonged, the encouragement they got from leaders they followed, and the fear they felt of being alone or attacked drove people to form huge groups of support. On an individual level it is clear the mobs helped people and gave them friends who they could count on, but on a group level the benefit is not as clear. It is evident that the mobs helped leaders propel their ideas and made it seem that they had the best ideas due to their enormous following, but beyond that the mobs become more problematic. All of these people moshed together into one encouraging group creates a mob mentality that can be very dangerous. Within these groups it is clear they all had the same ideas, but no one really wanted to deviate from the path. This would then lead to everyone following each other and not thinking for themselves. This occurred due to the fear of being left out or all alone which was a very real fear at this time. Not only did violence encourage these mobs, but the mobs themselves caused more violence due to the high-pressure circumstances they all found themselves in. It was a frightening time for the common people and joining into groups relieved some tension because they felt they had support and protection. Forming into mobs was a common occurrence in the revolution and the violence that occurred because of it may not have been avoidable due to the unprecedented circumstances the people of France found themselves in. Even though violence was already occurring, the mob mentality that was created increased the violence. The encouragement of forming groups and people needing to feel as though they belong all played an important role into the formation of the mobs. It is unfortunate that these mobs that helped individuals caused a lot more unneeded violence throughout the French Revolution.

## Citations

- Alpaugh, M. "A Self-Defining 'Bourgeoisie' in the Early French Revolution: The Milice Bourgeoise, the Bastille Days of 1789, and Their Aftermath." *Journal of Social History* 47, no. 3 (September 2014): 696–720. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jsh/sht108>.
- Censer, J. R. "Historians Revisit the Terror--Again." *Journal of Social History* 48, no. 2 (January 2014): 383–403. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jsh/shu077>.
- "Charlotte Corday." Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 6th Edition, February 2020, 1. <http://dbproxy.lasalle.edu:2057/login.aspx?direct=true&db=asn&AN=134509982&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.
- Drury, John. "When the Mobs Are Looking for Witches to Burn, Nobodys Safe: Talking about the Reactionary Crowd." *Discourse & Society* 13, no. 1 (2002): 41–73. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926502013001003>.
- Duclos, Antoine-Jean. "Journée du 16 octobre 1793, la mort de Marie-Antoinette[JT1] [JT2] ." *University of California*. Accessed April 2, 2020. [https://dbproxy.lasalle.edu/asset/ARTSTOR\\_103\\_41822001752961](https://dbproxy.lasalle.edu/asset/ARTSTOR_103_41822001752961).
- Ellwood, Charles A. "A Psychological Theory of Revolutions." *American Journal of Sociology* 11, no. 1 (1905): 49–59. <https://doi.org/10.1086/211375>.
- Reed, Isaac Ariail. "Power and the French Revolution: Toward a Sociology of Sovereignty." *Historická Sociologie* 2018, no. 1 (2018): 47–70. <https://doi.org/10.14712/23363525.2018.38>.
- Singer, Brain C.J. "Violence in the French Revolution: Forms of Ingestion/ Forms of Expulsion ." *Social Research* 56, no. 1 (1989): 246–93.