Jacobins

Political club of the French Revolution. In 1789 Breton members of the States-General met in a Dominican (Fr. 'Jacobin') monastery to form the Jacobin Club. By 1791, it had branches throughout France. By 1792, Robespierre had seized control of the Jacobins and the club adopted more radical policies. In 1793, they engineered the expulsion of the Girondins and the club became an instrument of the Reign of Terror. It collapsed after Robespierre's downfall in 1794.

Summary Article: Jacobinism

The Jacobins were the most radical and egalitarian group involved in the French Revolution. They led the government from June 1793 to July 1794, the most politically radical year of the revolution and also the year of the Terror. During their time in power, they attempted to create a “republic of virtue”—that is, a republic that attempted to purify its citizens of moral corruption. The Jacobins fell from power with the overthrow of Maximilien Robespierre. They were never to achieve power in France again. But they left a long legacy, particularly within France itself, where there continued to be a tradition of Jacobin politics on the left, while on the right the memory of the Jacobin republic has been abhorred.

The origins of the Jacobins lay in the Breton club, which was founded shortly after the outbreak of the revolution in 1789 by deputies to the new National Assembly. It became a focus for patriots (supporters of the revolution). The membership of the club rapidly widened, and it moved into the premises of a former Jacobin monastery in the Rue St. Honoré in Paris. It took the name Society of the Friends of the Constitution but soon became known as the Jacobin club. A network of affiliated clubs sprang up throughout France—as many as 1,544. They maintained connections through correspondence with the mother club in Paris and through the circulation of pamphlets and speeches. The Jacobins were mostly from the middle and professional classes, although a few former nobles were members in the early years.

The Jacobins acted as a debating club and political pressure group rather than as a formal political party. The French revolutionaries were opposed to the idea of political parties, thinking that parties would be used to promote particular interests rather than the good of all. In the early years of the revolution, the Jacobin club was dominated by relative moderates such as Antoine Barnave, Adrien Duport, and Alexandre Lameth who were committed to a constitutional monarchy and a limited franchise. Following the attempted flight of Louis XVI in June 1791 and the gradual unraveling of the constitutional monarchy that followed, the moderates left the club. In late 1791, the club came under the domination of Jacques Pierre Brissot and the group later known as the Girondins, a group that spearheaded the drive to war over Robespierre's objections.

In the summer of 1792, when the monarchy was overthrown and the first French republic founded, the Jacobins moved decisively to the left. The Girondins abandoned the club in the autumn of 1792. It was now under the domination of radical revolutionaries, prominent among them Robespierre, Georges

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Danton, Louis de Saint-Just, Jean-Paul Marat, and other members of the "mountain" (Jacobin deputies in the National Convention). In September 1792, the Jacobins changed their name to the Society of Jacobins, Friends of Liberty and Equality. In June 1793, the sans-culottes (the poorer working-class members, so named because they wore full-length trousers instead of the more fashionable knee-length culottes) ousted the discredited Girondins from the convention, and the Jacobins came into government.

The Jacobins were hard-liners, prepared to enforce the aims of the revolutionary government and make a concerted effort to gain victory both in the war with foreign powers and with the many counterrevolutionaries within France. To do this, these hitherto idealistic and humanitarian men adopted the tactics of terror. They formed the first government to enlist terror in the cause of a political ideal. The terms terrorist and terrorism were invented retrospectively in late 1794 to describe the Jacobins and their methods. The Jacobins proved to be cautious about implementing the economic measures desired by the sans-culottes and were made uneasy by the violence of the sansculottes, even though the threat of that violence had been enlisted to put the Jacobins into power. The Jacobins curbed the political autonomy of the sansculotte movement, and the sans-culottes became disaffected. In the coup of Thermidor (July 1794), Robespierre and Saint-Just were overthrown by other Jacobins, who feared that Robespierre was planning to move against them. The Jacobin government fell with them. The Terror itself began to wind down almost immediately afterward. In November 1794, the Jacobin club was closed down, and many Jacobins fell victim to reprisals in the so-called White Terror.

The ideology of Jacobinism, as it has since been interpreted by political theorists, has inevitably been seen as being closely bound up with the Terror, but Jacobinism was not solely about terror. Indeed, historians have long debated the extent to which the Terror during the Jacobin republic was inherent in the universal principles of liberty and equality of 1789, or whether it was a contingent and pragmatic response to war and civil war in 1793. Jacobinism was founded on the strand of optimism in Enlightenment thought that held that mankind was basically good and that human society could be made better in the here and now, rather than in an afterlife. Jacobins believed in open and transparent politics. They were radical democrats, supporting popular sovereignty based on the vote for all men. Their conception of politics was a moral as well as a democratic one: They believed that it was the responsibility of politicians to consider only the public good—that is, to be politically virtuous. Political leaders should reject financial corruption and refuse to profit personally from their public office. The Jacobins were politically rather than socially egalitarian, although they were opposed to extremes of wealth or poverty. Their social ideal was that of a republic of small producers, peopled by landed peasants and independent artisans.

See also
Egalitarianism, Radical Democracy, Republicanism, Revolution, Robespierre, Maximilien, Virtue

Further Readings


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