

The French revolution

Timothy Tackett is an American historian at the University of California Irvine. In his book, When the king took flight, he explains how the French Revolution, which was based on human rights and nonviolent reform when it started in 1789, was turned into “the reign of Terror” only three years later.

In the summer of 1789 a revolution began in France that is widely considered one of the turning points of Western civilization. Although the origins of that revolution are complex, once it had begun, it was rapidly linked to the lofty humanitarian ideals of the Enlightenment, including religious tolerance, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and control of the government by the governed. Most revolutionaries were also committed to political change through nonviolent means, “through no other force than the force of reason, justice, and public opinion”, as one early leader put it. These ideals, similar in many respects to those promulgated by the founding fathers of the United States, were soon embodied in a “Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen”, which became a model for liberal reform throughout the world.

Yet, despite its idealistic beginnings, the Revolution of 1789 was transformed in a period of only a few years into a veritable “Reign of Terror”. By the summer of 1793 a totalitarian and eminently intolerant regime had emerged that regularly employed fear and violence as instruments of power. Searches without warrant, arrests without indictment, the repression of free speech: all were pursued more systematically and more efficiently than in any previous period of French history. Justice before the law and due process were often abandoned in favor of guilt by association. A “law of suspects” attacked individuals on the basis of unverified denunciations. By the summer of 1794 thousands of people had been sent to the guillotine – some of them through travesties of the judicial system – or had been executed summarily without trial.

Any explanation of how the liberal, humanitarian revolution of 1789 was transformed into the Terror of 1793-94 would have to take into account a variety of factors: the state of war existing between France and much of Europe; the organized efforts of dissident opponents to launch a counter-revolution; the terrible factionalism that beset the revolutionary leaders themselves; and the emergence of an obsessive fear of conspiracy – real or imagined – that helped fuel the factionalism and justify popular violence. But a full explanation of the origins of the Terror must also reflect on the impact of a single event: the attempted flight of the reigning king of France on June 21, 1791. The dramatic effort of Louis XVI and his family to escape the capital and abandon the new government established in his name set in motion an extraordinary chain of actions and reactions with profound effects on all elements of society and every corner of the nation.