

Sample - Study Guide

SEO METADATA:

META TITLE: Jacobins: Definition, History & Club Members

META DESCRIPTION: Jacobins | Definition | History | French Revolution | Jacobin | Club Members | Reign of Terror

PARENT KEYWORD: European History

MAIN KEYWORD: French Revolution

SECONDARY KEYWORDS: Jacobins Definition | Jacobins History | Jacobins French Revolution | Jacobins Reign of Terror | Jacobin Club Members

CONTENT:

Jacobins - Explanation

“The King must die, so that the country can live.” - Maximilien Robespierre

An inflammatory quote, but one that defines what is arguably the most famous philosophical and political movement in European history, one with repercussions that were felt all over the globe — the French Revolution. What do we know about the French Revolution beyond the guillotine, the fall of the monarchy, and Marie Antoinette’s famous decree, *“Let them eat cake!”* The French Revolution began with the Storming of the Bastille on July 14, 1789, but before then a group of political players would rise to prominence to lead their country in war and a new republic.

The Jacobin Club

The Jacobin Club, known in French as the *Société des amis de la Constitution* (Society of the Friends of the Constitution) until 1792; and afterwards as the *Société des Jacobins, amis de la Liberté et de l'égalité* (Society of the Jacobins, Friends of Freedom and Equality), was an influential French political club whose radical revolutionary policies guided the country in the years shortly after the French Revolution. They were known to be a mostly left-wing political club, and reached the peak of their popularity during the Reign of Terror. The club officially disbanded in 1794; however, their radical policies continued to influence other liberal politics, even into modern times.

Origins of the Jacobin Club

The Jacobin Club was formed as the Club Breton at the Estates-General of 1789, the last general assembly of the three states of the French realm (the clergy, the nobility, and the commoners), held at Versailles on May 4, 1789. The Jacobins were formed mostly of delegates from Brittany, and some of their originating members were the Comte de Mirabeau, Antoine Lavoisier; Jérôme Pétition; Maximilien Robespierre, and Louis Marie de la Révelière-Lépeaux.

The Estates-General was an assembly comprised of representatives from the three estates in every region of France. In 1788, King Louis XVI sent out a royal summons for the assembly to gather and decide on undertaking reforms and new taxes in France to help with the dire financial situation the country had found itself in.

“We have a need of a concours of our faithful subjects, to assist us [to] surmount all the difficulties we find relative to the state of our finances...these great motives have resolved us to convoke the Assemblée des États of all the provinces under our authority.”

- King Louis XIV, Lettre du Roi Pour la Convocation des États-Généraux, à Versailles

The Kingdom of France was in debt. Thanks to the Seven Years' War and the French monarchy's excessive spending, the country found itself with a deficit of about \$56 million, as announced to the Estates-General by the king's finance minister, Jacques Necker. The monarchy needed the Estates-General to approve new reforms in order to replenish its coffers, and the burden was due to fall on the already-suffering common folk and peasantry. This request, and the assembly, is now seen as the beginning of the French Revolution.

Jacobin Club: Origin of the Name

Why are the Jacobins remembered as “Jacobin” and not “Club Breton” — a logical moniker since most of its members came from Normandy; or even by their eventual name, *Société des amis de la Constitution*?

The assembly of delegates moved from Versailles to Paris, and that was when the Club Breton began to meet in secret to discuss their objectives. They rented out a monastery of the Dominican Order, the *Convent des Jacobins de la rue Saint-Honoré* in order to house their growing club. They soon named themselves as the *Société des amis de la Constitution*, but the Parisian nickname for their convent stuck. They were nicknamed the *Jacobins* by their political enemies, and the shortened moniker carried on throughout history; eventually being used to describe those with similarly radical left-wing politics.

Jacobins: Politics

The Jacobin Club, as it was now commonly known, expanded when they decided to extend membership beyond political delegates to any man in France. By July of 1790, there were about 1200 members of the club in Paris, plus over a hundred affiliate clubs established around France — but what were these men joining for?

The main focus of the Jacobin Club was to ensure that France wouldn't slide backwards into the oppressive monarchy, once their planned revolution was over. The Jacobins were officially committed to the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen; a declaration

that outlined the universal rights of all citizens, and served as the foundation for a new French constitution, inspired by ideals of the Enlightenment. They sought to release France's common citizens from the feudalistic oppression they lived in under the monarchy.

The Jacobins and the Constitution

In 1791, the new French Legislative Assembly drafted a new constitution that made France a constitutional monarchy; the king would remain a figurehead of the state, but the new constitution transferred the actual power of the state to representatives of the population. This angered many French conservatives — comprised mostly of the nobility — who were hesitant to lose their tax-free status and many of the other benefits that came with their class. In July of that year, King Louis XVI attempted to flee France, but was caught by the National Guardsman and dragged back to Paris. The Legislative Assembly were torn with what to do — as were the Jacobins.

The more radical Jacobins, led by Maximillien Robespierre, and supported by the *sans-culottes* (militant supporters of the Revolution, often of the peasant class), called for the king to be deposed while the more moderate Jacobins hesitated. This led to a deep divide between the two, one that would play out in the aftermath of the new French constitution.

In 1792, the Legislative Assembly was replaced by the National Convention, which was more in line with the new constitution and its commitment to adhering to the Declaration of the Rights of Man. When setting down the new constitution, the Jacobins split along the line of including the constitutional monarchy — the radical Jacobins called for a constitution that had absolutely zero ties to the monarchy, even if it was a symbolic one; they hoped that the king would be deposed and France would institute an atheistic republican constitution, further alienating the clergy from statehood. The more moderate Jacobins were unbothered by the King as a powerless head of state, and in general favoured more “bourgeois” policies like a free-market economy, decentralised government, and a generally more moderate pace of reform.

Jacobins vs. Girondins

As Robespierre gained more influence, especially in the radical *Montagnard* faction of the club, the divide between the more progressive and conservative sides of the party grew, and soon the more moderate Jacobins left to form their own political group; the Girondins. The primary difference between the Girondins and the remaining Jacobins (now known as the *Montagnards*) was that the Girondins were more sympathetic to the bourgeoisie (upper and middle class) members of the assembly, and supported their economic and militaristic interests; while the Montagnards were more supportive of the *sans-culottes* and the peasant class. In the end, their opposing views on the Austria-Prussia war would be their undoing; the Montagnards hoped to avoid the economic mistakes of the past, and felt the republic was too new to enter into war; while the Girondins believed this war would solidify the status of the new French Republic.

In 1792, before the official division of the club, the Montagnards formed a minority in the government, and the newly re-named National Convention declared war against Austria and Prussia. It was, to them, a move that would solidify France as a new republic in the eyes of Europe, and also punish Austria and Prussia for their loyalty to the former monarchy. It didn't take long for the tides of war to turn against the French, inspiring mobs of the *sans-culottes* to raid the National Convention and arrest all that they saw as traitors

to the new French Republic. They demanded the arrest of King Louis XVI, for the war to cease, and for the complete abolishment of the monarchy.

The Montagnards were now in the perfect position to rise to power, riding the wave of the *sans-culottes*. The Montagnards were already allies of the militant group, supporters of the peasant class, and agreed that any trace of the monarchy needed to be completely abolished. They supposed the common people as it adhered to their ideals of equality for all under the eyes of the law, and the ultimate sovereignty of the people of France.

In 1793, supported by the Montagnards, the people raided the National Convention again after the bourgeois commanding general of the French army abandoned his troops at war and defected to a more sympathetic nation. This time when they took power, they demanded the more conservative members of the National Convention (the Girondins and their allies) be arrested, and finally executed King Louis XVI.

Robespierre and the Reign of Terror

With his political opponents either arrested or killed, Robespierre took the opportunity to rise to power in the French National Convention. He was a prolific orator, with some historians estimating that he gave hundreds of speeches during the time he was in power. His time as President became known as the Reign of Terror due to the fact that he killed thousands of members of the aristocracy, his political opponents, and anyone who he viewed as a traitor to the Republic.

While he was in power, Robespierre oversaw the execution by guillotine of approximately 20,000 people, including the remnants of the French monarchy. He remained his power until his death by, appropriately, guillotine in 1794. By that time Robespierre's Reign of Terror had started to go out of control as he became increasingly paranoid about "traitors" to the republic or anyone who he considered to be disloyal to France. He was arrested in 1794 by his fellow Montagnards, and executed soon after.

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