2 Rise of the Jacobins and the Cordeliers

What impact did the revolutionary clubs have on French citizens?

In the absence of political parties, clubs were established to support the popular movement. They were set up soon after the Estates-General met in May 1789. For many ordinary people they provided a stage from which speakers could debate the great issues of the day. The majority of Frenchmen who had never been involved in political life discovered that they provided a crash course in political education. This section will examine two of the most important of these clubs and the growth of popular activity which they helped to foment.

The revolutionary clubs

As there were no political parties, the clubs played an important part in the Revolution. They kept the public informed on the major issues of the day, supported election candidates, and acted as pressure groups to influence deputies in the Assembly and to promote actions which the deputies seemed reluctant to undertake. In essence, they provided education in political participation.

The Jacobin Club

The Jacobin Club originated in meetings of radical Breton deputies with others of similar views. When the Assembly moved to Paris after the October Days these deputies and their supporters rented a room from the monks of a Jacobin convent in the Rue Saint-Honoré, hence the name by which they are now universally known. Their official title remained the 'Society of the Friends of the Constitution'. At the club, members debated measures that were to come before the Assembly.

The Jacobin Club set a high entrance fee for its members. There were 1200 members by July 1790 and they came mainly from the wealthiest sections of society. To begin with they associated themselves with the ideas of the **physiocrats**. They raised no serious objections to the introduction of free trade in grain, or the abolition of guilds in 1791. That they started to move towards accepting a more controlled economy can be explained by the problems posed by war and counter-revolution. Even then these measures were forced on them by their more extreme supporters – the *sans-culottes*.

Jacobin ideology was based on a combination of Enlightenment thought and revolutionary practice. They came to reject the notion of monarchy. What distinguished the Jacobins from other contemporary clubs was that they were highly political men of action. As the Jacobins moved further to the left in the summer of 1792 they favoured increased **centralisation** of government in order to defend the republic. The key figure to emerge during this period was

KEY TERMS

Physiocrats A group of French intellectuals who believed that land was the only source of wealth and that landowners should therefore pay the bulk of taxes.

Centralisation Direct central control of the various parts of government, with less power to the regions.

KEY FIGURES

Maximilian Robespierre (1758–94)

The most important member of the Committee of Public Safety. Deeply committed to the ideal of a Republic based on popular sovereignty and prepared to take all measures necessary to preserve it from its enemies.

Jacques Pierre Brissot (1754–93)

Leading figure among the Girondin group of deputies. Believed passionately in the need to spread the ideals of the Revolution. Called for war with France's neighbours to achieve this.

KEY TERM

Insurrection An uprising of ordinary people, predominantly *sans-culottes*.

Maximilian Robespierre, leader of a minority group of radical Jacobin deputies (see page 107).

A national network of Jacobin clubs soon grew up, all linked to the central club in Paris with which they regularly corresponded. By the end of 1793 there were over 2000 Jacobin clubs across France. It has been estimated that between 1790 and 1799 the movement involved two per cent of the population (about 500,000 people). The significance of the clubs is that they enabled for the first time large numbers of people to become directly involved in the political life of their country.

The Cordeliers Club

The Cordeliers Club, founded in April 1790, was more radical than the Jacobin Club and had no membership fee. It objected to the distinction between 'active' and 'passive' citizens and supported measures which the *sans-culottes* favoured, namely:

- direct democracy where voters choose deputies
- the recall of deputies to account for their actions, if these went against the wishes of the people
- the right of **insurrection** – rebellion, if a government acted against popular wishes.

It had much support among the working class, although its leaders were bourgeois. Georges Danton (see profile on page 122) and Camille Desmoulins were lawyers. Jacques-René Hébert was an unsuccessful writer who had become a journalist when freedom of the press was allowed. **Brissot** was also a journalist. But the most notorious writer of all was Marat, a failed doctor turned radical journalist. He hated all those who had enjoyed privileges under the old regime and attacked them violently in his newspaper, *L'Ami du Peuple*. He became the chief spokesman of the popular movement.

During the winter of 1790–1 the example of the Cordeliers Club led to the formation of many 'popular' or 'fraternal' societies, which were soon to be found in every district in Paris and in several provincial towns. In 1791 the Cordeliers Club and the popular societies formed a federation and elected a central committee. The members of the popular societies were drawn mainly from the liberal professions such as teachers and officials, and skilled artisans and shopkeepers. Labourers rarely joined, as they did not have the spare time for politics.

SOURCE C

Jean-Paul Marat, 'Illusion of the Blind Multitude on the Supposed Excellence of the Constitution', *L'Ami du Peuple* No. 334, 8 January 1791. Jean-Paul Marat Archive, www.marxists.org/history/france/revolution/marat/.

The public's infatuation with the constitution is the folly of the moment.... When it enters the head of a people who have broken their chains, nothing in the world is more apt to flatter self-love than the idea of an indefinite freedom supported by the supreme power. Many among the press have represented the constitution as sublime, the guarantor of the nation's happiness. These pompous views have been circulated throughout the country. New chains are being forged. Credulous Parisians! Remember the inscriptions that decorated the altar of the Fatherland. It said to the people: You are the sovereign. Yet the law is still against you. The blind multitude didn't see that this whole foolish apparatus had no other goal than that of turning the soldiers of the Fatherland into instruments of executive power, maintaining the evil decrees that returned authority to the hands of the King. I repeat to you today: the constitution is a complete failure ... it forms the most dreadful of governments, it is nothing but an administration of royal sympathisers ... a true military and noble despotism.

According to Source C, what does Marat think of the proposed constitution? ?

Popular discontent in rural and urban areas

By the start of 1790 many peasants had become disillusioned with the Revolution. The sense of anticipation which followed the 'Night of 4 August' quickly diminished once they realised in the spring of 1790 that their feudal dues were not abolished outright but would have to be bought out (see pages 40–2).

A rural revolution started in 1790 in Brittany, central France and the south-east. This lasted until 1792 and placed pressure on the Jacobins. Peasants fixed the price of grain, called for the sale of Church land in small lots and attacked châteaux. The rising in the Midi (Languedoc, Provence and the Rhône valley) in 1792 was as important as any in 1789 in size and the extent of the destruction. These risings, and the deteriorating military situation, contributed to the most serious crisis of the Revolution. After the overthrow of the monarchy in August 1792, all feudal and seigneurial dues which could not be justified were abolished. Feudalism was finally abolished without compensation by the Jacobins on 17 July 1793.

The *sans-culottes*

The *sans-culottes* were urban workers. They were not a class, as they included artisans and master craftsmen, who owned their own workshops, as well as wage-earners. They had been responsible for the successful attack on the Bastille and for bringing the royal family back to Paris in the October Days, yet they had received few rewards. Many of them were 'passive' citizens (see page 52), who did not have the vote. They suffered greatly from **inflation**. To meet its

KEY TERM

Inflation A decline in the value of money, which leads to an increase in the price of goods.

expenses, the government printed more and more *assignats* (paper money), whose value therefore declined. There was a wave of strikes by workers against the falling value of their wages early in 1791. Grain prices rose by up to 50 per cent after a poor harvest in 1791. This led to riots, which resulted in shopkeepers being forced to reduce prices.

SOURCE D

? According to Source D, what do the *sans-culottes* consider to be their role?

From 'What is a sans-culottes?', April 1793, an anonymous document held in the Archives Nationales in Paris and quoted in D.I. Wright, editor, *The French Revolution: Introductory Documents*, University of Queensland Press, 1975, p. 171.

Reply to the impertinent question: What is a sans-culottes*? A* sans-culottes *you rogues? He is someone who always goes about on foot, who has not got the millions you would all like to have, who has no chateaux, no servants to wait on him, and who lives simply with his wife and children if he has any on the fourth or fifth storey. He is useful because he knows how to till a field, to forge iron, to use a saw, to roof a house, to make shoes, and to spill his blood to the last drop for the safety of the Republic. And because he is a worker, you are sure not to meet him in the cafes or gaming houses where others plot and wager … In the evening he goes to the assembly of his Section, not powdered and perfumed or well dressed, in the hope of being noticed by the women citizens, but rather to support good motions with all his strength, and to crush those from the despised faction of politicians. Finally, a* sans-culottes *always has his sword sharpened, ready to cut off the ears of all opponents of the Revolution; but at the first sound of the drum you see him leave for the Vendée, for the army of the Alps or for the Army of the North.*

The discontent of the urban workers was harnessed by the popular societies. They skilfully linked economic protests and grievances to the demand for a republic whose representatives were directly elected by the people. This made the Revolution more radical in ways which the bourgeois leaders of 1789 had neither intended nor desired.

Summary diagram: Rise of the Jacobins and the Cordeliers

	Jacobins	*Cordeliers*
Key members	Maximilian Robespierre	Georges Danton Camille Desmoulins Jacques-René Hébert Jacques Pierre Brissot Jean-Paul Marat
Supporters	Wealthy radical deputies	Bourgeois and working-class radicals
Key ideas	Centralisation	Direct democracy Right of insurrection

3 Emergence of the republican movement

What factors contributed to the emergence of the republican movement?

The outstanding politician and orator in the Constituent Assembly was **Comte de Mirabeau**, a nobleman who was elected for the Third Estate in 1789. His willingness to deal directly with the King cost him a great deal of popular support by the time of his death in April 1791. He was fairly typical of a group of moderate politicians who were becoming increasingly influential in the Assembly.

KEY FIGURE

Comte de Mirabeau (1749–91)

A nobleman of liberal beliefs and an outstanding orator who represented the Third Estate in the Estates-General. He worked in secret to support royal interests.

Barnave, Du Port and Lameth (the triumvirate) sought to try and heal the divisions between the aristocracy and bourgeoisie that had emerged during 1789. They feared the extremism of the new clubs and the emergence of the popular movement and wished to bring the Revolution to an end. In order for this to happen there had to be a compromise with the King. This was difficult, as anyone suspected of negotiating with the King was likely to be accused of selling out to the Court. There was also no means of knowing if the King was sincerely prepared to co-operate with the moderates. Louis dashed all their hopes by attempting to flee from Paris.

The flight to Varennes

Louis XVI was a devout man who deeply regretted accepting the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, which offended his conscience. He decided to flee from Paris, where he felt restricted by the Constituent Assembly, to Montmédy in Lorraine, on the border of Luxembourg, and put himself under the protection of the military commander of the area. He hoped that from there, in a position of strength, he would be able to renegotiate with the Constituent Assembly the parts of the constitution he disliked. Military action would, he hoped, be unnecessary, although the King was aware that there was a danger that his flight might open up divisions and bring about civil war.

Louis left Paris with his family on 20 June 1791. When he reached Varennes, during the night of 21–22 June, he was recognised by the local postmaster, Drouet, and stopped. He was brought back to Paris in an atmosphere of deathly silence. Louis' younger brother, the Comte de Provence, was luckier than the King. He also fled from Paris on 20 June with his wife but he arrived safely in Brussels the next day.

How significant was the flight to Varennes?

The flight to Varennes was one of the key moments of the early phase of the French Revolution. Before leaving, Louis had drawn up a proclamation to the

French people which set out in great detail his true feelings regarding the developments that had taken place.

udy Source E.
cording to Louis, who
o blame for the crisis?

SOURCE E

From the King's declaration on leaving Paris, 20 June 1791. He writes in the third person, quoted in John Hardman, *The French Revolution Sourcebook*, Arnold, 2002, pp. 135–6.

The king does not think it would be possible to govern so large and important a kingdom as France by the means established by the National Assembly such as they exist at present. His Majesty in giving his assent which he knew well he could not refuse, to all decrees without distinction was motivated by his desire to avoid all discussion which experience had taught him to be pointless. The nearer the Assembly approached the end of its labours the more wise men were seen to lose their influence. The mentality of the clubs dominated everything; thousands of incendiary papers and pamphlets are circulated every day … Did you want anarchy and the despotism of the clubs to replace the monarchical form of government under which the nation has prospered for fourteen hundred years? Did you want to see your king heaped with insults and deprived of his liberty whilst he was exclusively occupied with establishing yours?

The significance of the event was as follows:

- In the declaration it is obvious that Louis had failed to understand the popularity of the changes which had taken place since 1789.
- It became clear that once again (see the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, pages 58–61) the French people would have to make choices that many of them would have preferred to avoid.
- Louis in his declaration had emphatically renounced the Revolution. Could he continue to remain as head of state?
- The credibility of the new constitution was undermined before it had even been implemented.
- Support for a republic started to grow, while the popularity of the King declined.

On 24 June 30,000 people marched to the National Assembly in support of a petition from the Cordeliers Club calling for the King's dismissal from office.

Results of the flight

One immediate result of the flight was that the King lost what remained of his popularity, which had depended on his being seen to support the Revolution. Royal inn signs and street names disappeared all over Paris. His flight persuaded many who had hitherto supported him that he could no longer be trusted. People started to talk openly of replacing the monarchy with a republic.

The deputies in the Assembly acted calmly in this situation. They did not want a republic. They feared that the declaration of a republic would lead to civil war in France and war with European monarchs. Nor did they want to concede victory

SOURCE F

A satirical drawing published in 1791. 'The family of pigs brought back to the sty.'

Study Source F. What is the significance of the way the artist has chosen to portray the royal family in this contemporary cartoon?

to the radicals, who sought more democratic policies. 'Are we going to end the Revolution or are we going to start it again?' one deputy asked the Assembly.

On 16 July the Assembly voted to suspend the King until the constitution was completed. Governing without the head of state would encourage those who favoured republicanism. He would be restored only after he had sworn to observe it. This was going too far for some deputies: 290 abstained from voting as a protest. For others, suspension did not go far enough.

Division among the Jacobins

After the flight to Varennes, radicals were appalled when the King was not dethroned or put on trial. Their anger was directed against the Constituent Assembly, which they claimed no longer represented the people. The Cordeliers took the lead with the popular societies and persuaded the Jacobins to join them in supporting a petition for the King's deposition. This split the Jacobin Club. Those who did not want the King deposed – and this included nearly all the members who were deputies – left the club. They set up a new club, the **Feuillants**, which for the moment had control of the Assembly. Robespierre remained as leader of a small group of radical members. It seemed as though the Jacobins had destroyed themselves. However, only 72 of the provincial Jacobin clubs in France defected from the control of the Parisian club, and most of these drifted back in the next few months.

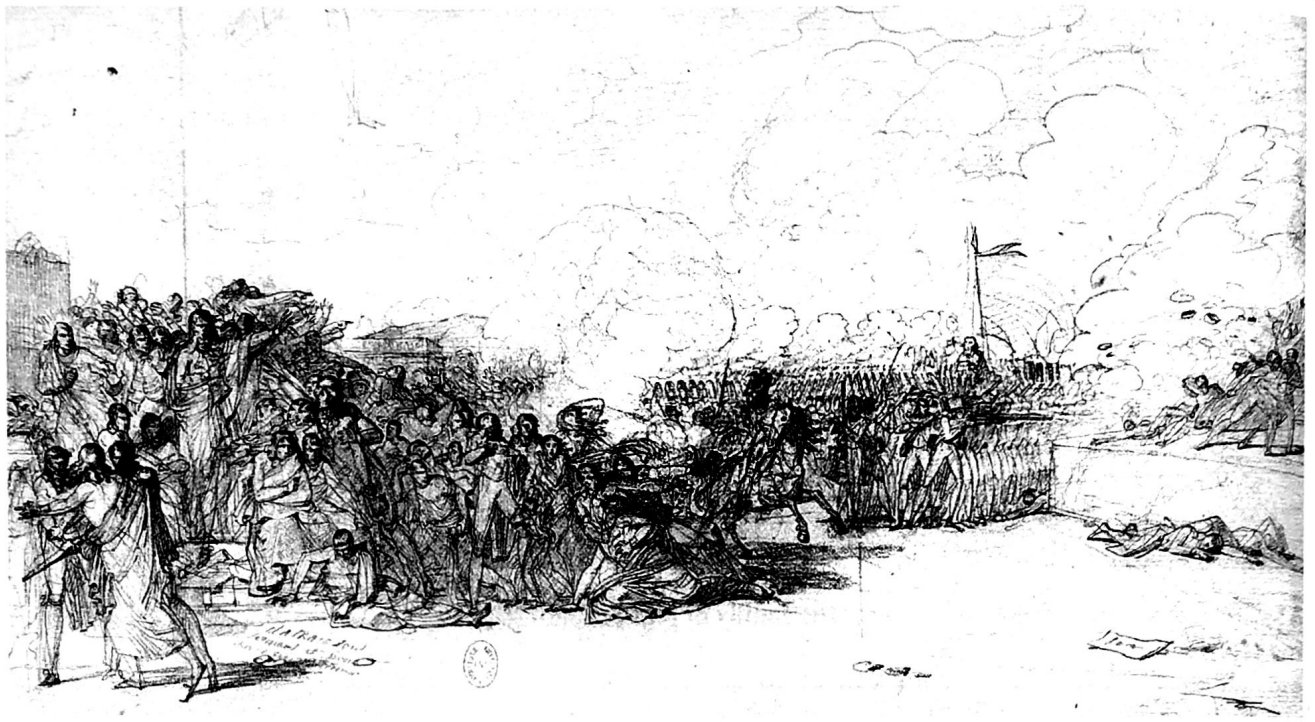
KEY TERM

Feuillants Constitutional monarchists, among them Lafayette, who split from the Jacobin Club following the flight to Varennes.

The Champs de Mars massacre

On 17 July 1791, 50,000 people flocked to the Champ de Mars, a huge field in Paris where the Feast of the Federation, celebrating the fall of the Bastille, had been held three days previously. They were there to sign a republican petition

SOURCE G



The shooting of demonstrators at the Champ de Mars.

? Look at Source G. What would the circulation of images like this hope to achieve?

KEY TERMS

Altar of the fatherland A large memorial to commemorate the Revolution.

Martial law The suspension of civil liberties by the State in an attempt to restore public order when there is severe rioting and mass disobedience.

on the '**altar of the fatherland**'. This was a political demonstration by the poorer sections of the Parisian population. The Commune, under pressure from the Assembly, declared **martial law**. It sent Lafayette with the National Guard to the Champ de Mars, where the Guards fired on the peaceful and unarmed crowd. About 50 people were killed.

This was the first bloody clash between different groups in the Third Estate, and it was greeted with pleasure in the Assembly. Messages of support for the Assembly poured in from the provinces. Martial law remained in force for a month, during which time some popular leaders were arrested. Others, such as Hébert, Marat and Danton, fled or went into hiding. The moderates had won and could now work out a compromise with the King without facing mob violence. It took nearly a year for the popular movement to recover. As far as the extremists were concerned, only the overthrow of the monarchy would satisfy their demands.

The Feuillants were more determined than ever to make an agreement with the King. Although they did not trust him and had lost popular support, for the moment they controlled Paris and the Assembly. Their long-term success, however, depended on the co-operation of Louis, and this was far from certain.

The Legislative Assembly

The acceptance of the constitution by the King on 13 September 1791 marked the end of the Constituent Assembly. Its final meeting was on 30 September. On 1 October the first meeting of the new Legislative Assembly was held. But by now suspicion and hatred among the deputies had replaced the optimism of 1789. The mood among the deputies in the new Legislative Assembly was far from co-operative. This change had come about because:

- the King's reluctance to accept measures he disliked
- suspicions regarding the King's acceptance of the Revolution, as revealed by the flight to Varennes
- the fear of counter-revolutionary plots.

To prevent his political opponents in the Constituent Assembly from dominating the next Assembly, Robespierre proposed a **self-denying ordinance**. This was passed and stated that no member of the Constituent Assembly, including Robespierre, could sit in the new Legislative Assembly.

In the elections for the new Legislative Assembly (29 August to 5 September), under a quarter of the active citizens voted. The Assembly of 745 members which was elected was almost wholly bourgeois. In the semi-circular meeting chamber the seating arrangement in front of the speaker gave rise to new political labels – **left**, **right** and **centre**. There were few nobles, most of whom had retired to their estates and kept themselves to themselves, hoping for better times. Only 23 clergy were elected. There were no peasants or artisans, and few businessmen. At the opening of the Legislative Assembly, it was possible to identify three broad groups of deputies:

- The Left: 136 deputies, most of whom were members of the Jacobin Club. The most prominent were a small group of deputies from the Gironde department, known as the **Girondins**.
- The Right: 264 deputies who were members of the Feuillant Club and considered the Revolution to be over.
- The Centre: 345 deputies making up the largest group who were unattached.

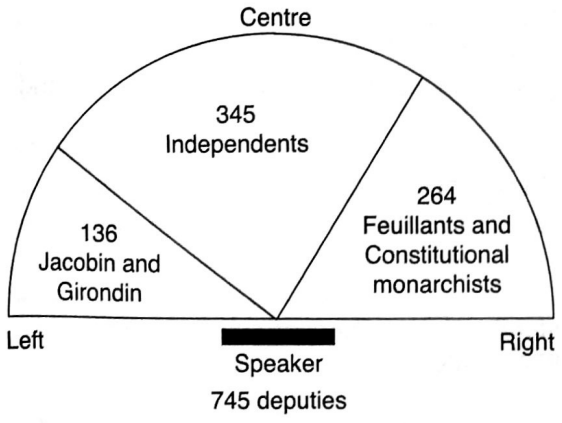


Figure 3.2 Main political groups in the Legislative Assembly, 1 October 1791 to 20 September 1792.

KEY TERMS

Self-denying ordinance Members of the National Assembly were not permitted to stand for election to the new Legislative Assembly.

Left Those seated on the left of the speaker of the Legislative Assembly favouring extreme policies such as removing the King and having a republic.

Right Those seated on the right of the speaker of the Legislative Assembly and supporting a limited monarchy.

Centre Those who sat facing the speaker of the Legislative Assembly favouring neither left nor right.

Girondins A small group of deputies from the Gironde and their associates – notably Brissot.

The growth of the counter-revolution

KEY TERM

mentaire Judges who hereditary positions on one of the thirteen parlements.

From the very start, the deputies were worried by the non-juring clergy and by the *émigrés*, whose numbers had increased greatly since the flight to Varennes. Nearly all the *ancien régime* bishops and many of the great court and ***parlementaire*** families had emigrated to Austria and the small German states along the River Rhine. What alarmed the Assembly most was the desertion of army officers. By early 1791, 1200 noble officers had joined the *émigrés*, although a large majority of pre-Revolution officers remained at their posts. All this changed after Varennes.

By the end of 1791 about 6000 had emigrated, which was 60 per cent of all officers. The Assembly passed two laws in November. One declared that all non-jurors were suspects. The other said that all *émigrés* who did not return to France by 1 January 1792 would forfeit their property and be regarded as traitors. When the King vetoed these laws his unpopularity increased. He appeared to be undermining the Revolution.

4 Key debate

What was the impact of the counter-revolution on France?

For a long time historians did not devote much time or effort to examining the counter-revolution. It was considered to be less fashionable to study than other aspects of the Revolution. Part of the problem was the lack of agreement about what exactly the term meant or even when it started. For some it started before 1789 with the revolt of the aristocracy against the Crown's reform proposals of 1787–8. Others saw it emerging rather later with the fusion of opposition against the religious policies of the National Assembly and dislike of the way Paris was dictating the pace of change within France.

An additional concern was to what degree the counter-revolution posed a significant threat to the Revolution. Certainly, in the early years of the Republic its scale posed a serious problem for the Convention, given the context of a foreign war which was not progressing well and a deteriorating economy. In essence, the Revolution was facing simultaneous threats from both internal and external enemies.

One of the first detailed studies of the counter-revolution was by Jacques Godechot. In this extract he notes the foreign threat against the Revolution.

EXTRACT 1

From Jacques Godechot, *The Counter Revolution, Doctrine and Action 1789–1804*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972, p. 386.

Two conclusions emerge at the end of this study: the relatively minor influence of doctrine on counter-revolutionary action; and an almost complete failure of

this action in 1804, the year in which this study ends … One of the principal causes of the failure of the counter-revolution in the period under review and particularly in 1799, lies in the lack of synchronization of the attacks launched against France. Each time it had been able to muster upon all its forces to hurl back these assaults. Although the Empire consolidated the work of the Revolution, it also cemented the forces of the counter-revolution and enabled it to triumph in 1814. But the counter-revolution that imposed itself in power at that time bore only a distant resemblance to the counter-revolution of 1804. It had to appropriate many of the ideas and principles of the Revolution.

The Marxist historian George Rudé believed that there was credible threat from the counter-revolution which was held at bay during the Jacobin Republic.

EXTRACT 2

From George Rudé, *Revolutionary Europe 1783–1815*, Fontana, 1964, p. 170.

Royalist and counter-revolutionary agitation had in one form or another been a matter of concern since 1789; but, until war broke out, it had only achieved little success. After the King's execution, royalist activity from both without and within had played a part in fostering rebellion in the Vendée and the 'federalist' departments of the south, west and north. Yet as long as the Jacobins remained in power, these dangers had been held in check and had barely affected the capital. The royalists had however taken fresh heart from the more liberal policies of their successors. By now they were divided into two main groups – the 'ultras' who demanded a return to 1787 and the total restoration of the Old Régime; and the 'constitutionalists', who broadly speaking favoured a restoration of the constitution of 1791. Unfortunately for the 'constitutionalists', the Count of Provence (Louis XVI's brother) was a determined ultra.

J.M. Roberts believed that the term counter-revolution was misleading since it suggested a reply to the Revolution rather than what he considered to be an autonomous existence clearly evident in the revolt of the nobility. He offers the following overview of the counter-revolution.

EXTRACT 3

From J.M. Roberts, *The French Revolution*, Oxford University Press, 1978, pp. 112–13.

Nor did the counter-revolution triumph in 1815. The Bourbon line came back, but on terms, to a constitutional monarchy, with the essential rights of 1789 guaranteed, the revolutionary establishment undisturbed except for a few hard-core regicides, the land settlement untouched, and no return to the old localism and corporatism. Though a more blatantly reactionary programme still seemed feasible to some and lingered as a serious possibility as late as the 1870s, the counter-revolution's practical effect in French history was as negligible as its mythological and intellectual importance was great. Practical conservatism after 1815 increasingly flowed away from it into the channels favoured by the notables who emerged triumphant from the revolution.

To what extent do the historians quoted in Extracts 1, 2 and 3 differ in their interpretations of the success of the counter-revolution? ?