

Enragés

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The **Enraged Ones** (French: *Les Enragés*) were a small number of firebrands known for defending the lower class and expressing the demands of the radical *sans-culottes* during the French Revolution.^[1] They played an active role in the May 31-June 2, 1793 Paris uprisings that forced the expulsion of the Girondins from the National Convention, allowing the Montagnards to assume full control.^[2]

The Enragés became associated with this term for their angry rhetoric appealing to the Convention to take more measures that would benefit the poor. Jacques Roux, Jean Varlet, Théophile Leclerc, and Claire Lacombe, the primary leaders of the Enragés, were strident critics of the Convention for failing to carry out the promises of the Revolution.^[3]

The Enragés were not a unified party. Rather, the individual figureheads that comprised the group identified as the Enragés worked for their own objectives, and evidence of cooperation is inconclusive.^[4] As individual political personalities, the Enragés were cynical to the point of anarchism, suspicious of most political organizations and individuals, and they resisted ties to others.^[5] The leaders did not see themselves as part of a shared movement, and Roux even called for Varlet's arrest.^[6] The notion of the Enragés as a cohesive group was perpetuated by the Jacobins as they lumped their critics Leclerc and Roux into one group.^[7]

1 Primary demands

In 1793, Jacques Roux delivered a speech at the National Convention known as the "Manifesto of the Enragés" that represents the essential demands of the group. He asserted that freedom and equality were thus far "vain phantoms" because the rich had profited from the Revolution at the expense of the poor. To remedy this, he proposed measures for price controls, arguing "Those goods necessary to all should be delivered at a price accessible to all." He also called for strict punishments against actors engaged in speculation and monopoly. He demanded the Convention take severe action to repress counterrevolutionary activity, promising to "show them [enemies] those immortal pikes that overthrew the

Bastille." Lastly, he accused the Convention of ruining the finances of the state and encouraged the exclusive use of the assignats to stabilize finances.^[8]

2 Formation of the Enrages

The Enrages formed in response to the Jacobin's reluctance to restrain the capitalist bourgeois. Many Parisians feared that the National Convention protected merchants and shop-keepers at the expense of the *san-culottes*. The Enrages, though not a cohesive body, offered the working poor a platform to express their dissent. Their dissent was often conveyed through riots, public demonstrations, and passionate oratory.

Jacques Roux and Jean-Francois Varlet, emboldened the Parisian working poor to approach the Jacobin Club on, 22 February 1793, and persuade them to place price controls on necessary goods. The Enrages appointed two females to represent the movement and their agenda to the National Convention. However, the Convention refused to grant them an audience. This provoked outrage and criticism throughout Paris. Some went as far as to accuse the Convention of protecting the merchant elite's interests at the expense of the *san-culottes*. Further attempts for the Enrages to communicate their position were denied by the Convention. Determined to be heard they responded with revolt. They plundered the homes and businesses of the merchant elite, employing direct action to meet their needs. The Enrages are noted for using legal and extra legal means to achieve their ends.^[9]

The Enrages were comprised of members within the National Convention and the *san-culottes*. They illuminated the internal and external war the *san-culottes* battled. They complained that the National Convention ordered men to fight on the battlefield, without providing for the widows and orphans remaining in France. They emphasized the unavailability of basic necessities, particularly bread. In his, **Manifesto of the Enrages**, Jacques Roux colorfully expressed this sentiment to the National Convention. He stated. "Is it necessary that the widows of those who died for the cause of freedom pay, at the price of gold, for the cotton they need to wipe away their tears, for the milk and the honey that serves for their children?"^[10]

They accused the "merchant aristocracy" of withholding access to goods and supplies to intentionally drive up prices. Roux, demanded that the Convention impose

capital punishment upon unethical merchants, who used speculation, monopolies, and hoarding to increase their personal profits at the expense of the poor. The Enragés labeled price-gouging as “counter-revolutionary” and treason. This sentiment extended to those who sympathized with the recently executed **King Louis XVI**. They felt that those who sympathized with the monarchy would also sympathize with those who hoarded goods. It is not surprising that many within the Enragés actively worked against the **Girondin** faction, and indeed they contributed to the demise of the moderate Girondins, who had fought to spare the King. Those who adhered to the ideologies presented in the **Manifesto of the Enragés**, wished to emphasize to the Convention that tyranny was not just the product of monarchy, and that injustice and oppression did not end with the execution of the King. In their view, oppression existed whenever one stratum of society sought to monopolize the majority of resources, while simultaneously preventing others from gaining access to those same resources. In their view the pursuit of resources was acceptable, but the act of limiting access to resources was punishable by death.

The Enragés called on the Convention to restrict commerce that it might not “consist of ruining, rendering hopeless, or starving citizens.”^[8] While the Enragés occasionally worked within political structures, their primary objective was achieving social and economic reform. They were a direct action group, attempting to meet the immediate needs of the working poor.^[9]

3 Women in the Enragés

Jean-Francois Varlet, understood the enormous influence women possessed, particularly within the **French Revolution**. Varlet, formed the Enragés by provoking and motivating working poor women and organizing them into a semi-cohesive, mobile unit. The Enragés often appointed women as speakers to represent the movement in the Convention. Revolutionary, proto-feminists, held vital positions within the Enragés, including **Pauline Leon** and **Claire Lacombe**. The proto-feminists of the French Revolution are credited with inspiring feminist movements in the Nineteenth Century.^[1]

4 Key leaders

Jacques Roux

Jacques Roux, a Roman Catholic priest was the leader of the Enragés. Roux supported the common people and the Republic. He participated in peasant movements and endorsed the **Civil Constitution of the Clergy**, to which he swore an oath on January 16, 1791. Roux claimed “I am ready to give every last drop of my blood to a Revolution that has already altered the fate of the human race by

making men equal among themselves as they are all for all eternity before God.”^[11] Roux saw violence as a key to the Revolution’s success. In fact, when **Louis XVI** was executed, it was Roux who led him to the scaffold.^[12]

Jean Varlet

Jean Varlet, another leader of the Enragés, played a leading role in the fall of the monarchy. When **Louis XVI** attempted to flee **Paris**, Jean Varlet circulated petitions in the **National Assembly** and spoke against the king. On August 10, 1792, the **Legislative Assembly** suspended the king and called for the election of a **National Convention**. Afterwards, Varlet became a deputy in the new Convention. Even as a member of this representative government, Varlet mistrusted representation and was in favor of direct universal suffrage, which could bind representatives and recall elected legislators. He sought to prevent the wealthy from expanding their profits at the expense of the poor and called for the nationalization of all profits obtained through monopoly and hoarding.^[13]

Théophile Leclerc

In 1790, **Théophile Leclerc**, joined the first battalion of **Morbihan** volunteers and remained a member until February 1792. He gained recognition in **Paris** through a speech attacking **Louis XVI** to the **Jacobins**. After moving to **Lyons**, he joined the **Central Club** and married **Pauline Léon**, a revolutionary woman. He approved of radical violence like the other Enragés, calling for the execution of expelled **Girondins** after the June 2 insurrection.^[14]

Claire Lacombe

In 1793, the actress **Claire Lacombe**, another individual associated with the Enragés, founded the **Society of Revolutionary Republicans**. This group was outraged by high costs of living, the lack of necessities, and awful living conditions. **Lacombe** was known for violent rhetoric and action. On May 26, 1793, **Lacombe** nearly beat to death a **Girondin** woman, **Théroigne de Méricourt**, with a whip on the benches of the Convention. She may have killed her if **Marat** had not intervened.^[14]

5 Other groups

To the left of the **Montagnards**, the Enragés were fought against by **Maximilien de Robespierre** and reemerged as the group of **Hébertistes**. Their ideas were taken up and developed by **Babeuf** and his associates.

Another group styling itself **les enragés** emerged in France in 1968 among students at **Nanterre University**. They were heavily influenced by the **Situationists** and would go on to be one of the leading groups in the May 1968 French insurrection.^[15]

6 References

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- [2] Paul R. Hanson, *The A to Z of the French Revolution*, (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2007), 120.
- [3] Popkin, *A Short History*, 68.
- [4] R.B Rose, *Enragés: Socialists of the French Revolution?*, (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1965), 73.
- [5] Rose, *Enragés*, 41.
- [6] Rose, *Enragés*, 74.
- [7] Rose, *Enragés*, 75.
- [8] Jacques Roux. "Manifesto of the Enragés," Trans. Mitchell Abidor, June 25, 1793, Marxist Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/history/france/revolution/roux/1793/enrages01.htm>
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- [12] Denis Richet, "Enrages," in *Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, ed. François Furet and Mona Ozouf (Harvard University Press, 1989), 338.
- [13] Richet, "Enrages," 337-338.
- [14] Richet, "Enrages," 339.
- [15] René Viénet, *Enragés and Situationists in the Occupation Movement, France, May '68*, (New York: Automeia, 1992).

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7 Further reading

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