

The French Revolution

The French Revolution was a period of radical social and political disorder in France and Europe. French society underwent massive changes as feudal, aristocratic, and religious privileges ceased to exist. The monarchy was abolished, and old ideas about hierarchy and tradition gave in to new Enlightenment* principles of citizenship and inalienable rights. The French Revolution changed the world and even today the French people celebrate the Storming of the Bastille on July 14th 1789 as their national holiday.

What were the causes of the revolution?

The causes of the French Revolution are two sides of the same coin; one side were the long-ranging problems, such as the condition of French society. Since the Middle Ages the French population had been divided into three orders or estates* which enjoyed different rights. The First Estate was the clergy whose members did not have to pay France's main tax, the *taille**, and who owned about ten per cent of the land. However, the clergy was not a homogenous group: the higher clergy were often the younger sons of the most important noble families, and the lower clergy were often poor parish* priests who were overworked and whose interests lay with the common people.

The Second Estate of the *Ancien Régime** was the nobility. Just as the First Estate, its members possessed several privileges and were exempt from taxes, especially the *taille**. The nobles held the best jobs in the army and the government. Nevertheless, some of the nobles had debts because of their expensive lifestyle. Therefore, they tried to raise the dues* paid by the peasants. Although the nobles enjoyed their economic advantages, they tried to expand their power at the expense of the monarchy while keeping their central positions in the military, the church, courts, and administration.

The overwhelming majority of the French belonged to the Third Estate, or the commoners of society. These commoners were divided by major differences in occupation, education, and wealth. The peasants constituted the largest segment of this order (about 80 per cent of the total population), owning about 40 per cent of the land. They had to give dues* to their local landlords as well as the tithe* to the clergy. They also had to work for the lord, especially at harvest time. The peasants' crops were often ruined when the nobles went hunting which was one of the nobles' privileges.

But not all common people were poor peasants. Although the majority of the people lived in the country, the people in the towns and cities, especially in Paris, played a crucial role in the French Revolution. Among them were workers whose living conditions were very harsh. They often had insecure jobs in workshops or factories or worked at home. In times of economic trouble, they were often hungry and desperately poor as prices rose faster than wages. The streets they lived in were dirty and unhealthy. Other commoners in the cities were better off. Some members of the Third Estate became rich as bankers, manufacturers, or merchants. Others went to university and became lawyers or university teachers, often criticizing absolutism and the privileges of the First and Second Estate.

Although they were different in many aspects, all the members of the Third Estate had something in common: they were the ones who had to pay for their country, they did not have a voice in politics, and they did not have any access to higher government posts.

Another long-term cause of the French Revolution was the Enlightenment (cf. Chapter "The Enlightenment") and its ideas. The American War of Independence (cf. Chapter "The Emergence and Rise of the United States") also paved the way for revolutionary ideas, for example that everyone is born equal or has the right to resistance against an unjust ruler. But many of these ideas and social injustice had existed for a long time before the outbreak of the French Revolution. Something must have changed in a relatively small period of time

which led to violent protests and finally to revolution. These changes were the immediate causes of the French Revolution.

One of these causes was the economic crisis of the late 1780s. The beginning of a manufacturing depression and bad weather led to serious problems. The number of unemployed workers rose as well as the price for bread after a series of bad harvests in 1787 and 1788. As a result, the poor were likely to suffer from malnutrition and diseases, some even starved to death. In July 1789, those urban workers who still had their jobs had to spend 75 per cent of their wages on food. Peasants and townspeople even rioted and attacked the nobles' castles since they could not bear the situation any longer.

Another cause was the king's financial situation. Louis XVI was in dire financial straits because of France's involvement in the American War of Independence (the French supported the Americans against England) and due to other wars that had been fought less successfully, increasing the national debt. The royal court was costly, civil servants had to be paid, the military needed financial support – all factors leading to the king's bankruptcy. The poorly run tax system did not help to ease the situation, as many taxes were collected by private companies and did not reach the king. Consequently, he wanted to get more money, but to achieve this, he needed to call an assembly of the three estates, the *Estates-General*,* which had not met since 1614. In August 1788, Louis XVI called the Estates-General for the next year. The hopes of what this assembly should accomplish were high: The king hoped to raise new taxes which even the Second Estate should pay, the nobles hoped to limit the powers of the king, and the people hoped that it would solve all their current problems, shown in the lists of grievances* and hopes for the future.



Image 1: The Third Estate carrying the clergy and the nobility, unknown author.

Phases of the Revolution

The Moderate Phase

The representatives of the Estates-General met in Versailles on May 5th, 1789. The nobility and the clergy sent about 300 delegates each, whereas the Third Estate sent about 600. The problem to be faced was how the delegates should vote: should each estate vote separately or as a whole? Or should each estate be voted by head, giving the Third Estate the chance to promote its interests with the help of some liberal nobles and clerics? On June 17th, the Third Estate declared itself to be a National Assembly* to work on a constitution. Three days later, the delegates found their usual meeting place locked, and they moved to an indoor tennis court and swore to meet until they had drawn up a French constitution. This event became known as the Tennis Court Oath* and was a truly revolutionary act since the delegates had no legal right to turn themselves into a National Assembly. Although Louis XVI ordered the delegates of the First and Second Estate to join the Third, he summoned troops around Versailles and Paris.

In July and August 1789, a series of peasants' revolts and urban uprisings saved the National Assembly* from the king's attempt to restore his authority. The peasants destroyed castles and the records of the dues they had to give their lords, showing their resentment of the entire landholding system that had determined their lives. The most famous of the urban uprisings was the Storming of the Bastille on July 14th, despite the fact that only seven prisoners were imprisoned in this medieval fortress which served as state prison and armoury*. The Parisian mob had not gathered to free the prisoners: it had come to demand the ammunition stored in the Bastille. When the prison governor refused to comply, the mob eventually took hold of the building after a violent battle. The governor was killed, his head carried round the streets on a spike. The Storming of the Bastille became a

symbol of the French Revolution in which the monarchy was overthrown and a republic set up based on the ideas of liberty, equality, and brotherhood. Even today, the French still celebrate July 14th as a national holiday.

During the agrarian revolts, panic spread throughout France that foreign troops would invade, supported by an aristocratic plot which became known as the Great Fear.* The uprisings and this fear influenced the work of the National Assembly in Versailles, leading to the abolition of the feudal rights of the nobles as well as the fiscal rights of the nobility and clergy. Many nobles started to flee as they thought that not only their property and their privileges, but also their lives were in danger.

On August 26th, the National Assembly adopted the Declaration of Man and the Citizen.* This document contains important ideas from the Enlightenment such as the rights of liberty, property, security, resistance to oppression, the freedom of speech and the press, and it affirmed the destruction of aristocratic privileges. The declaration also raised the important question whether the idea of equal rights for all men included women as well. Olympe de Gouge certainly thought so and published a Declaration of the Rights of Women and the Female Citizen in 1791 which contained the idea that women should have the same rights as men. Although the National Assembly ignored her ideas, this was not the only time that women influenced the course of the French Revolution.

On October 5th 1789, thousands of women from Paris marched to Versailles to complain about the lack of bread. At that time, Louis XVI had not yet endorsed the abolition of aristocratic privileges and the Declaration of Rights, but the women's insurrection* forced the king to make up his mind and accept the changes. The next day, the royal family was brought to Paris while the women sang that they were bringing back the baker and his family as the king had also given in to their demand of bread. The National Assembly soon followed, meeting in Paris where the delegates worked on a constitution that established a limited, constitutional monarchy*.

In June 1791, Louis tried to escape from Paris and flee the country because he could not accept his situation. But the royal family was recognized near the border, taken back to Paris, and immediately placed under house arrest at the Tuileries*. As a result of the escape attempt, the credibility of the king as a constitutional monarch had been seriously undermined. Nevertheless, on September 3rd, the new constitution was adopted by the National Assembly, and Louis XVI reigned with limited powers over France. It soon became obvious that he did not like his new role, and people started to call him "Monsieur Veto" as he vetoed many resolutions of the National Assembly and he lost his remaining credibility as a leader.

In April 1792, the king's reputation suffered even more when France declared war on Austria. This happened because the kings of Austria and Prussia had invited other European monarchs to use force to re-establish absolute monarchy in France. Initially, the French troops did not fare well in the fighting, the price of bread rose once more, and the search for scapegoats* soon began. After the Brunswick Manifesto* was published the people did not have to look very hard: It became clear to them that the nobles who had fled and the king were traitors. Louis now hoped for a foreign invasion to restore him to power, but this did not happen. After a secret cupboard containing proof of Louis' correspondence with foreign powers had been discovered in Tuileries Palace, the royal family was arrested and the monarchy suspended. A National Convention* was chosen by all French men, not just by property-holders, to decide on the new form of government. This new constitutional body established a republic on September 21st. It also decided the fate of the king and the queen who were executed in January and October 1793. The revolution entered its second stage, a more radical stage than the first.

The Radical Phase

The second stage of the French Revolution was a phase of increasing radicalism. Friends and foes of the revolution were bound to use violence to solve their problems. Over time it became less clear who was a friend and who was an enemy of the revolution as real and imaginary traitors were executed by the thousands.

The enemies of the revolution were found behind French borders as most of Europe had formed a coalition against France to invade it, and, at first, it looked like the revolutionaries would lose the war. But the enemies of the revolution were also found within French borders. In September 1792, French nobles and clerics who had supported the king and had been arrested were killed in the streets of Paris by revolutionary mobs who feared that they might help the invading armies. These murders became known as the September massacres*. Other French enemies of the republic included a group of Catholic and royalist counter-revolutionaries who tried to overthrow the republic and restore the monarchy in the Vendée* in March 1793, but their attempt was futile and violently suppressed by supporters of the revolution.

To save the republic from its enemies in France and abroad, an executive committee – the Committee of Public Safety* – was established with broad powers which were soon abused by the radical Jacobins*. The Jacobin Club was the most famous political club of the French Revolution. It got its name from their original meeting place - a Dominican convent in the Rue St. Jacques in Paris. The members of this political group believed that the Sansculottes* had not gained enough from the revolution. These urban workers who supported the revolution were named after the fact that they did not wear the knee-breeches of the upper class, but wore long trousers instead. They emphasized the idea of equality by dressing alike. Their strong views on what the revolution should achieve included universal male suffrage* and fixed prices on basic goods such as bread. They often supported the actions of the Jacobins as well.

The Jacobins used drastic measures in times of crisis: their leader, the lawyer Maximilien Robespierre*, began the Reign of Terror* to save the revolution from its enemies, and tens of thousands of so-called counter-revolutionaries were executed. Revolutionary tribunals were set up to try people quickly, and their actions were supported by the Sansculottes. In a famous speech, Robespierre explained that the Terror was necessary and inevitable, “Terror is only justice prompt, severe and inflexible. [...] The government in a revolution is the despotism of liberty against tyranny.” The Terror was not restricted to Paris. All over the country more than 12,000 people were guillotined, but many others were shot, drowned, or killed in other ways.

Apart from the counter-revolutionaries in France, there were absolute monarchs to be dealt with. The Committee of Public Safety thus created a national conscript* army which became the largest European army of 1,000,000 men and ended the series of French defeats. This *Levée en masse** did not just enlarge the army, but it also led to much of the civilian population supporting the military. This development proved to be successful, and the Republican army pushed back the enemies across the Rhine and soon captured the Austrian Netherlands. The creation of a people’s army - instead of the relatively small armies of professional soldiers and mercenaries* that had fought the wars of the ruling dynasties - changed warfare for ever. The levée was a key development in modern warfare and would lead to steadily larger armies with each successive war, culminating in the total war of the modern world.

The Terror was not only an emergency régime dealing with enemies of the revolution, but also an attempt to change society completely. Many of its supporters like Robespierre and Saint-Just* tried to establish true liberty, equality, and fraternity. To break with the past and promote revolutionary ideas, a Republican Calendar was introduced. Every year had twelve months of 30 days each which were given new names based on nature and weather conditions. The ten days of the week were renamed after fruit, crops, and animals. The numbering of years was also changed, and 1792 became Year 1 of the Revolutionary Calendar which was in use until 1805. Another one of Robespierre’s ideas was the Cult of the Supreme Being* which he devised to become the new state religion. As a consequence, people did not marry in churches any more, and divorces were permitted by the state.

The Terror ended in July 1794 with the execution of Robespierre and his close supporters. As Robespierre had become too powerful, the Convention voted for his arrest on July 27th. The executions took place the next day, the 10 Thermidor. Thus, the Thermidorian Reaction ended the most radical phase of the French Revolution.

Over the next five years, France was ruled by five Directors* according to the new Constitution of the Year III.* The new constitution favoured property-holders since the universal suffrage of 1793 was replaced by limited suffrage based on property, allowing only about 30,000 French to vote. The new constitution had been passed to establish a moderate government which should have been acceptable to many French. Instead of moderation and reconciliation, however, France under the Directory saw a period of crisis and discontent: Royalists desired the restoration of the monarchy, whereas Jacobins hoped to regain power as a result of ongoing economic struggles. In 1799, the French general Napoleon Bonaparte* seized power and founded a Consulate* which ruled France until he crowned himself Emperor of the French* in 1804.

Results

The French Revolution had serious consequences throughout Europe. News of events initially caused much interest and prompted radicals to demand political reforms. For others, however, the French Revolution represented a serious political danger. It was the cause of much anxiety in the absolute governments and illustrated the potentially serious consequences of social unrest and the ideas of the Enlightenment. After the French Revolution, the world would never be the same.

One example of these consequences can be found just outside France: The Republic of Mainz was a product of the French Revolution: it lasted from March to July 1793. After the ruler of Mainz had fled in October 1792, citizens of Mainz founded a Jacobin club; they promoted the Enlightenment and the French revolutionary ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity, aiming for a German republic to be established following the French model. A democratically elected parliament met in March 1793, declaring the represented territory (which extended to Bingen in the west and to Landau in the south) to be free and democratic, denying any ties to the Holy Roman Empire,* and joining France. The same day, Mainz was besieged by Prussian and Austrian troops, and, in July, the democratic experiment ended with the fall of the city. This outlines the development of the early 19th century, when more and more countries found themselves caught between revolution and restoration.

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