

# French Revolution

The **French Revolution** (1789–1815) was a period of political and social upheaval in the political history of France and Europe as a whole, during which the French governmental structure, previously an absolute monarchy with feudal privileges for the aristocracy and Catholic clergy, underwent radical change to forms based on Enlightenment principles of democracy, citizenship, and inalienable rights. These changes were accompanied by violent turmoil, including executions and repression during the Reign of Terror, and warfare involving every other major European power.

Over the next 75 years, France would be governed, variously, as a republic, a dictatorship, a constitutional monarchy, and an empire.

## Causes

Among the economic factors were:

- A poor economic situation and an unmanageable national debt, both caused and exacerbated by the burden of a grossly inequitable system of taxation, the massive spending of Louis XVI and the many wars of the 18th century;
- High unemployment and high bread prices causing more money to be spent on food and less in other areas of the economy;
- Food scarcity in the months immediately before the revolution.

In addition to economic factors, there were social and political factors, many of them involving resentments and aspirations given focus by the rise of Enlightenment ideals:

- Resentment of royal absolutism;
- Resentment by the ambitious professional classes towards noble privileges and dominance in public life;
- Resentment of manorialism by peasants, wage-earners, and, to a lesser extent, the bourgeoisie;
- Resentment of clerical privilege (anti-clericalism) and aspirations for freedom of religion;
- Aspirations for liberty and (especially as the revolution progressed) republicanism;

Finally, perhaps above all, was the almost total failure of Louis XVI and his advisors to deal effectively with any of these problems.

## Estates-General of 1789

On August 8, 1788, the King agreed to convene the Estates-General in May of 1789. By this time, Jacques Necker was in his second turn as finance minister.

Although it would appear that the magistrates were not specifically aware of the "forms of 1614" when they made this decision, this provoked an uproar. The 1614 Estates had consisted of equal numbers of representatives of each estate, and voting had been by order, with the First Estate (the clergy), the Second Estate (the nobility), and the Third Estate (middle class and peasants) each receiving one vote.

Pamphlets and works by liberal nobles and clergy, including comte d'Antraigues and the Abbé Sieyès, argued the importance of the Third Estate. As Antraigues wrote, it was "the People, and the People is the foundation of the State; it is in fact the State itself". Sieyès' famous pamphlet *Qu'est-ce que le tiers état? (What is the Third Estate?)*, published in January 1789, took the argument a step further: "What is the Third Estate? Everything. What has it been up to now in the political order? Nothing. What does it demand? To become something herein."

When the Estates-General convened in Versailles on 5 May 1789, The question of whether voting was ultimately to be by head or by order was again put aside for the moment, but the Third Estate now demanded that credentialing itself should take place as a group. Negotiations with the other two estates to achieve this, however, were unsuccessful, as a bare majority of the clergy and a large majority of the nobility continued to support voting by order.

## **National Assembly (1789)**

On 10 June 1789 Abbé Sieyès moved that the Third Estate, now meeting as the *Communes* (English: "Commons"), proceed with verification of its own powers and invite the other two estates to take part, but not to wait for them. They proceeded to do so two days later, completing the process on 17 June. Then they voted a measure far more radical, declaring themselves the National Assembly, an assembly not of the Estates but of "the People." They invited the other orders to join them, but made it clear they intended to conduct the nation's affairs with or without them.

In an attempt to keep control of the process and prevent the Assembly from convening, Louis XVI ordered the closure of the Salle des États where the Assembly met. Weather did not allow an outdoor meeting, so the Assembly moved their deliberations to a nearby indoor tennis court, where they proceeded to swear the Tennis Court Oath (20 June 1789), under which they agreed not to separate until they had given France a constitution. A majority of the representatives of the clergy soon joined them, as did forty-seven members of the nobility. By 27 June the royal party had overtly given in, although the military began to arrive in large numbers around Paris and Versailles. Messages of support for the Assembly poured in from Paris and other French cities. On 9 July the Assembly reconstituted itself as the National Constituent Assembly.

## **National Constituent Assembly (1789–1791)**

### **Storming of the Bastille**

Many Parisians presumed Louis's actions to be the start of a royal coup by the conservatives and began open rebellion when they heard the news the next day. They were also afraid that arriving Royal soldiers had been summoned to shut down the National Constituent Assembly. Paris was soon consumed with riots, anarchy, and widespread looting. The mobs soon had the support of the French Guard, including arms and trained soldiers, because the royal leadership essentially abandoned the city.

On 14 July, the insurgents set their eyes on the large weapons and ammunition cache inside the Bastille prison, which also served as a symbol of tyranny by the monarchy. After several hours of combat, the prison fell that afternoon. Although the Parisians released only seven

prisoners (four forgers, two noblemen kept for immoral behavior, and a murder suspect), the Bastille served as a potent symbol of everything hated under the *ancien régime*.

The King and his military supporters backed down, at least for the time being. Lafayette took up command of the National Guard at Paris. Jean-Sylvain Bailly, president of the Assembly at the time of the Tennis Court Oath, became the city's mayor under a new governmental structure known as the *commune*. The King visited Paris, where, on 27 July he accepted a tricolore cockade, as cries of *vive la Nation* "Long live the Nation" changed to *vive le Roi* "Long live the King".

Nobles were not assured by this apparent reconciliation of King and people. They began to flee the country as *émigrés*, some of whom began plotting civil war within the kingdom and agitating for a European coalition against France.

The Great Fear- in addition, plotting at Versailles and the large numbers of men on the roads of France as a result of unemployment led to wild rumours and paranoia (particularly in the rural areas) that caused widespread unrest and civil disturbances and contributed to the Great Fear.

## **Toward a Constitution**

On 4 August 1789 the National Constituent Assembly abolished feudalism, in what is known as the August Decrees, sweeping away both the seigniorial rights of the Second Estate and the tithes gathered by the First Estate. In the course of a few hours, nobles, clergy, towns, provinces, companies, and cities lost their special privileges.

Looking to the Declaration of Independence of the United States for a model, on 26 August 1789, the Assembly published the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. Like the U.S. Declaration, it comprised a statement of principles rather than a constitution with legal effect.

The National Constituent Assembly functioned not only as a legislature, but also as a body to draft a new constitution.

On 5 October 1789 the people of Paris, mainly working women, marched on Versailles in what was the Women's March on Versailles. The women were responding to their anger at the harsh economic situations they had to face such as bread shortages while the King and his court held banquets such as that for the royal guards on October 1, 1789. They were also demanding an end to Royalist efforts to block the National Assembly and for the King and his administration to move to Paris in hopes for the poverty to be addressed. On 6 October 1789, followed by 20,000 National Guards, the King and the royal family moved from Versailles to Paris thus legitimizing the National Assembly.

## **Revolution and the Church**

The Civil Constitution of the Clergy, passed on 12 July 1790 (although not signed by the King until 26 December 1790), turned the remaining clergy into employees of the State and required that they take an oath of loyalty to the constitution. The Civil Constitution of the Clergy also made the Catholic church an arm of the secular state. The pope never accepted the

new arrangement, and it led to a schism between those clergy who swore the required oath and accepted the new arrangement ("jurors" or "constitutional clergy") and the "non-jurors" or "refractory priests" who refused to do so. The ensuing years saw violent repression of the clergy, including the imprisonment and massacre of priests throughout France. The Concordat of 1801 between Napoleon and the Church ended the dechristianisation period and established the rules for a relationship between the Catholic Church and the French State.

## **Legislative Assembly (1791–1792)**

Under the Constitution of 1791, France would function as a constitutional monarchy. The King had to share power with the elected Legislative Assembly, but he still retained his royal veto and the ability to select ministers. The Legislative Assembly first met on 1 October 1791, and degenerated into chaos less than a year later. The Legislative Assembly consisted of about 165 Feuillants (constitutional monarchists) on the right, about 330 Girondists (liberal republicans) and Jacobins (radical revolutionaries) on the left, and about 250 deputies unaffiliated with either faction. Early on, the King vetoed legislation that threatened the *émigrés* with death and that decreed that every non-juring clergyman must take within eight days the civic oath mandated by the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. Over the course of a year, disagreements like this would lead to a constitutional crisis, leading the Revolution to higher levels.

## **National Convention (1792–1795)**

The Convention, charged with writing a new constitution, met on 20 September 1792 and became the new *de facto* government of France. The next day it abolished the monarchy and declared a republic. This date was later retroactively adopted as the beginning of Year One of the French Revolutionary Calendar. As a consequence, King Louis was seen as conspiring with the enemies of France. 17 January 1793 saw King Louis condemned to death for "conspiracy against the public liberty and the general safety" by a weak majority in Convention. The 21 January execution led to more wars with other European countries. Louis' Austrian-born queen, Marie Antoinette, would follow him to the guillotine on 16 October.

## **Reign of Terror**

The Committee of Public Safety came under the control of Maximilien Robespierre, and the Jacobins unleashed the Reign of Terror (1793-1794). At least 18,000 people met their deaths under the guillotine or otherwise; after accusations of counter-revolutionary activities. The slightest hint of counter-revolutionary thoughts or activities could place one under suspicion, and the trials did not proceed scrupulously.

Following these arrests, the Jacobins gained control of the Committee of Public Safety on 10 June, installing the *revolutionary dictatorship*. On 13 July, the assassination of Jean-Paul Marat—a Jacobin leader and journalist known for his bloodthirsty rhetoric—by Charlotte Corday, a Girondin, resulted in further increase of Jacobin political influence. Georges Danton, the leader of the August 1792 uprising against the King, having the image of a man who enjoyed luxuries, was removed from the Committee and on 27 July, Robespierre, "the Incorruptible", made his entrance, quickly becoming the most influential member of the Committee as it moved to take radical measures against the Revolution's domestic and foreign enemies.

Meanwhile, on 24 June, the Convention adopted the first republican constitution of France, variously referred to as the French Constitution of 1793 or Constitution of the Year I. It was ratified by public referendum, but never applied, because normal legal processes were suspended before it could take effect.

On 5 September, the Convention, pressured by the people of Paris, institutionalized *The Terror*: systematic and lethal repression of perceived enemies within the country.

Guillotine- between 18,000 and 40,000 people were executed during the Reign of Terror. The guillotine became the symbol of a string of executions: Louis XVI had already been guillotined before the start of the terror; Queen Marie Antoinette, the Girondins, Philippe Égalité (despite his vote for the death of the King), Madame Roland and many others lost their lives under its blade. The Revolutionary Tribunal summarily condemned thousands of people to death by the guillotine, while mobs beat other victims to death. Sometimes people died for their political opinions or actions, but many for little reason beyond mere suspicion, or because some others had a stake in getting rid of them. Most of the victims received an unceremonious trip to the guillotine in an open wooden cart (the tumbrel). Loaded onto these carts, the victims would proceed through throngs of jeering men and women.

## **New religion**

On June 7 Robespierre, who had previously condemned the *Cult of Reason*, advocated a new state religion and recommended that the Convention acknowledge the existence of God. On the next day, the worship of the deistic *Supreme Being* was inaugurated as an official aspect of the Revolution. Compared with Hébert's popular festivals, this austere new religion of Virtue was received with signs of hostility by an amazed Parisian public.

In 1794, Robespierre had ultra-radicals and moderate Jacobins executed; in consequence, however, his own popular support eroded markedly. On 27 July 1794, the Thermidorian Reaction led to the arrest and execution of Robespierre and Saint-Just. The new government was predominantly made up of Girondists who had survived the Terror, and after taking power, they took revenge as well by persecuting even those Jacobins who had helped to overthrow Robespierre, banning the Jacobin Club, and executing many of its former members in what was known as the White Terror.

The Convention approved the new "Constitution of the Year III" on 17 August 1795; a plebiscite ratified it in September; and it took effect on 26 September 1795.

## **The Directory (1795–1799)**

The new constitution created the *Directoire* (English: *Directory*) and created the first bicameral legislature in French history. The parliament consisted of 500 representatives — *le Conseil des Cinq-Cents* (the Council of the Five Hundred) — and 250 senators — *le Conseil des Anciens* (the Council of Elders). Executive power went to five "directors," named annually by the *Conseil des Anciens* from a list submitted by the *le Conseil des Cinq-Cents*.

With the establishment of the Directory, the Revolution might seem closed. The nation desired rest and the healing from its many wounds. Those who wished to restore Louis XVIII

of France and the *ancien régime* and those who would have renewed the Reign of Terror were insignificant in number.

The new régime met with opposition from remaining Jacobins and the royalists. The army suppressed riots and counter-revolutionary activities. In this way the army and its successful general, Napoleon Bonaparte eventually gained much power. On 9 November 1799 (18 Brumaire of the Year VIII) Napoleon staged the *coup of 18 Brumaire* which installed the Consulate; this effectively led to his dictatorship and eventually (in 1804) to his proclamation as *Empereur* (emperor), which brought to a close the specifically republican phase of the French Revolution.