

## Chapter IX. The French Revolution

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France “replaced the ‘Old Regime’ with ‘modern society,’ and at its extreme phase it became very radical, so much so that all later revolutionary movements have looked back to it as a predecessor to themselves.” The French Revolution occurred in the most advanced country of the day, the center of the Enlightenment. It was the most powerful, wealthy nation in Europe. It had the largest population (24 m) under one government. Paris was smaller than London, but double Vienna and Amsterdam. Europeans took their ideas from France, and the Revolution was to profoundly effect them.

### 41. Backgrounds

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#### A. The Old Regime: The Three Estates

1. Legally an aristocratic, even feudal society; everyone belonged to an “estate” or “order” of society. The clergy was the First Estate; the nobility the Second Estate; and everyone else, from the wealthiest businessman to the poorest peasant or city worker, was the Third Estate. Legal rights and personal prestige depended on Estate, though these were politically and socially obsolescent.
2. The role of the Church was similar to the Anglican Church in tithing, bishops’ political power, and the wealth and numbers of the clergy. The 100,000 clergy, owned 5-10% of the land with much of the income going to the aristocratic holders of higher church offices.
3. Nobles numbered about 400,000. They virtually monopolized all high offices and honors--government, church, army. They were largely tax exempt and had blocked all reforms.
4. The bourgeoisie, the elite of the Third Estate, was well off; for example, foreign trade had increased five-fold, 1713 to 1789. They resented the privileges and arrogance of the aristocracy. Commoners were as well off as in most nations, but they did not share in business prosperity. From 1730 to 1788 prices rose about 65%, wages only 22%--the wage earning proletariat had real grievances.

#### B. The Agrarian System of the Old Regime

1. Most people (80%) were rural, but none were serfs: Peasants owed no labor and only a few token services. They worked their own land, rented land, or were sharecroppers; some hired out as laborers. Nobles’ retained a few feudal rights: hunting rights; collection of banalités for use of mill, bakeshop, or wine press; and limited court and police powers.
2. Manor owners owned “eminent property” rights, with certain rents or transfer payments owed. But ownership was widespread: peasants owned 40%, nobles 20%, the Church 10%, and the remainder in crown, waste, or common land. The Revolution was to free land ownership from all indirect encumbrances--manorial fees, eminent property rights, communal practices, and church tithes.
3. Peasants occupied almost all the land, through ownership or lease; France was a nation of small farmers. There was no big agriculture, no manorial lords actually managing estates and selling his own crops, as in England. By 1780, many manorial lords, pinched by inflation or seeking greater returns, collected dues more rigorously and revived old dues that had fallen into disuse. Lease and sharecropping terms became less favorable to the peasant. Resentments built, since the property system bore no relation to economic usefulness.
4. France was unified, meaning that unpopular social conditions could bring national opinion and agitation. The Revolution was to rouse a sense of brotherhood, and to turn that into a passion for citizenship and civic rights to the public advantage.

### 42. The Revolution and the Reorganization of France

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#### A. The Financial Crisis

1. The Revolution was precipitated by financial collapse owing mainly to war costs, present (25%) and past (50%)--though the debt was smaller per capita than that of Britain or Holland. The key was low revenue, due to exemptions and tax evasion. Aristocrats blocked tax reform by Maupeou, Turgot, and Necker. In 1786, **Calonne** suggested a land tax without exemptions; a lightening of indirect taxes; a confiscation of some church property; and the establishment of provincial assemblies in which all citizens would be represented.
2. The “assembly of notables” called to discuss the program resulted in a deadlock, and Calonne was fired. Brienne, succeeded him, and tried to push the same program through the Parlement of Paris. The nobles insisted that only an Estates-General could consider the matter--and fought off an attempt to

replace the parlements. Louis XVI agreed to call the Estates-General for May, with the classes invited to elect reps and prepare lists of grievances.

#### B. From Estates General to National Assembly

1. Nobles, through Parlements, ruled that the Estates-General should meet and vote by Estates--giving them a 2/3 majority; the aristocracy would rule. Many nobles talked of a constitutional government with freedoms and limited tax privileges.
2. Led by the **Abbé Sieyès**, the middle class had other ideas: *What Is the Third Estate?* Everything! Using Rousseau's ideas of the social contract, Sieyès insisted that the Third Estate was the General Will of the nation. Class antagonisms built, making peaceful solutions impossible. When the Estates-General met in May it was boycotted by the Third Estate which insisted on one man, one vote. After six weeks of debate they were joined by the clergy, and the Third Estate declared itself the **National Assembly**. Shut out of their meeting hall by troops, they met in a nearby indoor tennis court and swore the **Tennis Court Oath** on June 20--declaring they would not disband until they had written a new national constitution. They (echoing Rousseau) claimed to be sovereign.
3. Louis XVI had failed: "He lost control over the Estates General, exerted no leadership, offered no program until it was too late, and provided no symbol behind which parties could rally. He failed to make use of the profound loyalty to himself felt by the bourgeoisie and common people." Defied by the National Assembly, he yielded to conservative opinion (especially his brothers) and moved 18,000 troops to Versailles to dissolve the Estates-General by force.

#### C. The Lower Classes in Action

1. The harvest of 1788 had been poor, and 1789 was a year of depression--falling wages and unemployment, while food prices rose. The government, paralyzed by the crisis, was unable to act to relieve distress. Workers rioted in Paris, peasants refused to pay taxes, and vagrants and beggars increased. Townspeople feared social violence and began to arm.
2. On July 14 a crowd became a mob, was fired on, assaulted and captured the **Bastille**, murdering six soldiers, the governor of the Bastille, and the Mayor of Paris; army units near Paris did not act. The king accepted a citizen committee as the government of Paris, sent away the troops he had called to Versailles, and ordered all to join the National Assembly. A bourgeois national guard was created to keep order in Paris, headed by **Lafayette**.
3. In the countryside, a general panic called the **Great Fear began**--becoming part of a general agrarian insurrection in which peasants burned some manor houses and in general attacked any records of fees and dues. A wave of **emigrés**, mainly nobles, fled France.

#### D. The Initial Reforms of the National Assembly

1. Fearing loss of rents, the National Assembly on the "night of August 4" ended all remaining vestiges of feudalism, all titles and tax exemptions. Dues were ended, with compensation (later eliminated). On August 26 the **Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen**: "Men are born, and remain, free and equal in rights;" the "rights of man" included liberty, property, and resistance to oppression; freedom of thought and religion were guaranteed; careers were to be open to all; law was to express the General Will; powers of government were to be separated in branches.
2. Thomas **Paine's *Rights of Man*** (1791) carried the message in English. **Olympe de Gouges** wrote *The Rights of Woman* (1792), and her ideas were seconded by **Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*** (1792)--but few men argued for women's rights.
3. The National Assembly remained divided, with "patriots" vs conservatives. Finally, a crowd of market women and revolutionary militants, followed by the Paris national guard, besieged Versailles and moved both Louis and his family and the National Assembly to Paris (October).
4. Influenced by radical elements, the National Assembly became more liberal--as conservatives formed a second wave of emigrés. The more liberal now began to form into clubs, of which the most important was the Society of the Friends of the Constitution, known as **Jacobins**. The Jacobins used the club as a caucus to discuss policies and plan change.

#### E. Constitutional Changes

The National Assembly/Constituent Assembly governed France from 1789 to 1791. It wrote a new constitution destroying the Old Regime: France was to have 83 Departments of about the same size, with uniform municipal organization. Officials were to be elected locally, with no one to act for the central government. Sovereign power was vested in a unicameral assembly. The executive branch was kept weak; the king could only suspend or postpone laws. In July, 1791 the king tried to flee, but was caught; he had left behind papers repudiating the Revolution. Thus no one favored a strong central executive; France was to be ruled by a debating society with more than the usual number of hotheads. The new Legislative

Assembly was to be elected by active citizen, males over 25 who paid some direct tax; they voted for “electors,” on a ratio of 100 to 1, who then elected the representatives (who met property qualifications).

#### F. Economic Policies

The revolutionaries never disowned the national debt, owed largely to the bourgeois. To help pay the debt and pay current expenses, the Constituent Assembly in 1789 confiscated all Church property and issued notes (**assignats**) against them. Holders could use them to purchase church property--which went largely to speculators. The government also abolished the old guilds and trade unions in favor of “free trade”--clearly favoring bourgeois owners.

#### G. The Quarrel with the Church

1. The Church was outraged by the loss of its property (leading to the closing of many schools), but the crowning blow was the **Civil Constitution of the Clergy of 1790**. The Assembly created a national church: parish priests and bishops were to be elected by all citizens, and were to be paid by the state; the number of dioceses was cut; bishops were forbidden to accept the authority of the Pope; and all religious orders were closed. Much of this was in the spirit of the Gallican church, but it was forced on the clergy by the state.
2. The Pope branded the Civil Constitution as an usurpation and condemned the French Revolution in general. The clergy were required to swear a loyalty oath; half refused--including all but 7 bishops. The Church was henceforth to be anti-democratic, anti-liberal; liberal democrats were to be strongly anti-clerical. The position of the Pope was greatly improved.
3. The Constituent Assembly now disbanded, September 1791. France was to remain a constitutional monarchy with the Legislative Assembly for just ten months.

### 43. The Revolution and Europe: The War and the “Second Revolution,” 1792 pp. 378-384

#### A. The International Impact of the Revolution

1. “The doctrines of the French Revolution, as of the American, were highly exportable”--the concept of the rights of man, strongly appealing to the excluded and to the young. As Wordsworth wrote, *Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,/But to be young was very heaven!*
2. Edmund Burke in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* predicted anarchy and dictatorship for France and called on Englishmen to support gradual change. Catherine the Great called the French “vile riffraff” and forbade Russian translations of Voltaire. The French *émigrés*, led by Louis XVI’s brother, began using their aristocratic connections to preach a holy war against revolution. In the US, Jefferson’s party was called Jacobin, Hamilton’s reactionary.

#### B. The Coming of war, April 1792

1. In spite of the propaganda, no nation acted. Catherine urged other nations to act, but did nothing herself. **Pitt**, founder of the new Tory Party, called for orderly finance--precluding war for England, in spite of Burke. Even Leopold II, brother of M. Antoinette, did not act.
2. But the French government antagonized other nations by unilateral actions--as annexing of [papal] Avignon, abolition of feudalism in Alsace. Action began over the position of Louis and Marie A.: at Pillnitz, Austria and Prussia declared that if Leopold acted against France, they would, too. Though action was unlikely, *émigrés* used this Declaration of Pillnitz as a threat against France.
3. As a result, the **Girondins** became the dominant faction of revolution. Led by **Condorcet** and Mme Roland, they favored international revolution as the only sure way of preserving the Revolution. War was also favored by Lafayette, leader of a moderate group who saw war as a means of restoring the prestige of Louis XVI and so preserving constitutional monarchy. Leopold died and was replaced by Francis I, who was much more willing for war. As a result, the French Assembly declared war on Austria in 1792.

#### C. The “Second” Revolution: August 10, 1792:

1. War intensified the dissatisfaction of the peasants (angry at the progress of land distribution) and the urban workers (hurt by inflation caused by the “flight of gold” with the *émigrés*). But the return of the *émigrés* was a real threat; the workers rallied to the Revolution, if not the government. On the point of invading France, Austria and Prussia made the **Brunswick Manifesto**: if any harm came to the king or queen, the invaders would exact retribution. This threat, plus the oratory of **Robespierre, Danton, and Marat** caused an outburst of patriotic sentiment and anger against the king. 2. Intense feeling produced the **Marseillaise**, a fierce call to arms against tyranny and a revolt

In Paris: the king’s guard was massacred, the royal family imprisoned, and a revolutionary “commune” established in Paris. It ended the Legislative Assembly, calling for the election of a Constitutional

Convention elected by universal male suffrage. War hysteria and anarchy also led to the death of 1100 counter-revolutionaries ("September Massacres").

#### 44. The Emergency Republic, 1792-1795: The Terror pp. 3784-392

##### A. The National Convention

1. The convention met on September 20, 1792, and proclaimed the Year One of the Republic. On the same day, a minor victory at Valmy led to the Austrian retreat--and the French occupation of Belgium (Austrian Netherlands), Savoy, and the left bank of the Rhine. The Revolution was on the move. Britain opened talks with Holland, Prussia, and Austria--and France declared war. Russia and Prussia agreed to the second partition of Poland, but left Austria out--ending the coalition.
2. A new Jacobin group now appeared, the **Montagnards**--representing the most radical in Paris, the *sans-culottes*, shop-keepers and artisans. They denounced the king and queen; Louis was put on trial in December, found guilty of treason, and ordered executed--by one vote .

##### B. Background to the Terror

1. France was in crisis: its leading French general defected, and the Allies threatened to invade; the economy was in tatters, with food scarce and prices rising; and Catholics threatened counter-revolution. The sans-culottes demanded strong action, and the Jacobins complied: arrest of the Girondins, price and currency controls, rationing, requisitioning of food, and attacks on profiteering. Now peasants in the Vendée revolted, angered by conscription and encouraged by Catholic priests and British agents; they were followed by the cities of Lyons, Bordeaux, Marseilles and others, led by fleeing Girondins who also became **counter-revolutionaries**.
2. The Convention was also attacked by extreme radicals, the *enragés*, agitators who demanded strong action. They formed into "rev. armies," searching the rural areas for food, denouncing suspects, and preaching revolution. The Convention leader now was Maximilien Robespierre--seen as either a fanatic and demagogue or visionary idealist and ardent patriot. A lawyer, he had been a delegate to the Estates General and served in the Legislative Assembly (opposing the war). He was free of graft and bribery--and was called "the Incorruptible." Like Rousseau, he believed in unselfish public spirit, or "**virtue**."

##### C. The Program of the Convention, 1793-94: **The Terror**

1. The Convention needed to end civil strife and counter-revolution at home, mobilize the nation's people and resources to fight a war, and prepare a new democratic constitution and initiate social legislation. Wide powers were given to 12 men, the **Committee of Public Safety**.
2. To repress counter-revolution, the Committee began the **Terror**. Revolutionary courts and a Committee of General Security (political police) arrested enemies and anyone suspected of hostile acts. Victims included the Queen, Girondins, and *enrages*. Perhaps 40,000 died, mainly in areas in open rebellion. Most victims were Catholic peasants or laborers, though perhaps 3200 were nobles.
- \*3. The Committee functioned as a war cabinet; it centralized administration, replacing local officials with "national agents." To win the war, the Committee recruited prominent people for government service (as Lamarck and Lavoisier); it ordered the *levée en masse*, the first modern draft. It controlled the export of gold, confiscated foreign currency, and acted against hoarding; it began price and wage controls and requisitioned food and supplies for the army. It ended the manorial system, with peasants freed of all compensation to the former owners. Universal elementary education was legislated (not implemented). Slavery was abolished.
- \*4. *Enrages* were arrested and *Hébertists* (party of extreme Terror) were attacked, halting "unauthorized revolutionary violence." They launched a program of Dechristianization, adopting a republican calendar with new months, *décades* replacing weeks, and no saints days and church holidays. Many radicals proposed the worship of Reason; Robespierre, fearing to alienate the peasants, vetoed the act. They also attacked the "right-wing" Dantonists.
5. By 1794, France had the largest army yet known in Europe: 800,000 men, composed of officers newly promoted for talent and troops who felt themselves citizens fighting for a just cause. With the Allies divided, the French troops retook Belgium and Holland. Military success eased the pressures that had made the Terror possible. Robespierre was "outlawed" on 9 Thermidor, to be guillotined the next day. The Terror was over (July 27-28, 1794).

##### D. The **Thermidorian** Reaction: The Convention reduced the powers of the Committee and closed the Jacobin Club. Government controls were relaxed, producing inflation and sporadic working-class insurrections put down by the army. The bourgeoisie was triumphant--lawyers, office holders of the Old Regime plus parvenus and *nouveaux riches*, enriched by war-time profiteering or buying up former church land at bargain

prices. Men of the Convention believed in individual rights and written constitutions, but they saw democracy as “red terror” and mob rule and they resolved to write yet another Constitution.

#### 45. The Constitutional Republic: The Directory, 1795-1799

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##### A. The Weakness of the Directory

1. The Directory was the first formally constituted Republic. It rested on a narrow social base, with full political rights given only to “electors,” men of property--as in 1791. Two-thirds of the new legislature had to be from the Convention--a decision that provoked a riot that was ended by a young general named Bonaparte with a “whiff of grapeshot.”
2. Political France (Paris) was split: The right, royalists, who backed Louis XVIII, brother of Louis XVI, and reinstatement of nobility and church; the Left favored the democratic ideals of the Revolution. But radicals like **Babeuf**, who wished to abolish private property and introduce full equality, were quickly “liquidated.”

##### B. The Political Crisis of 1797

1. Free elections in March brought a body favoring constitutional monarchy; such a body was intolerable to the old republicans and to Napoleon Bonaparte:
2. **Napoleon**: Born on Corsica in 1769; parents of lesser Italian nobility. His father was a lawyer. He was educated in the French military school at Brienne; at 15 he transferred to the royal military academy, where he showed a great aptitude for history and math. Though commissioned a lieutenant of artillery in 1786, he apparently first worked for Corsican independence. In 1789 he joined the Rev, helping occupy Marseilles in 1792. His bravery and strategy in helping drive the English from Toulon led to his promotion to general. The fall of the Terror brought his imprisonment in Paris but was soon freed. Barras, in charge of state security, chose Napoleon to defend the Convention against an attack by royalists. His success brought further promotion, and his marriage to Josephine de Beauharnais, a leader of society. He next headed for Italy, given command of the ragged army in Italy by the Directory. Within two years he defeated the Austrians, won control of most of Italy, and made the **Peace of Campo Formio** (1797) by which he reorganized his conquests into the Cisalpine Republic (Milan) and the Ligurian Republic (Genoa) under French “protection.”
3. Britain in 1797 needed peace: Whig opposition to the war, republican radicals; bad crops, inflation; mutinies in the fleet, Ireland in rebellion--and now its only continental ally defeated. French royalists won elections; the Republicans worked a coup d'état, led by a general loaned by Napoleon. They annulled the elections and made peace with Austria. French revolutionary ideals were spread through Italy and Switzerland; France annexed Belgium and the west bank of the Rhine.

##### C. The Coup d'état of 1799: Bonaparte

1. The Directory was an inefficient dictatorship, unable to solve the problem of the national debt or restore financial confidence or stability, or prevent peasant risings in the Vendée. Napoleon had moved against Egypt, hoping to create a shorter route to India; but he angered the Russians and brought a new coalition against him. He won on land in Egypt, but his fleet was defeated by Nelson--leaving his army stranded. Meanwhile, Russian troops had retaken much of Italy. Napoleon returned to France a conquering hero; coup plotters saw him as the “man on the white horse,” able to lead France to victory and give them power. The resulting coup produced the Consulate, run by a three man committee headed by Napoleon.

#### 46. The Despotic Republic: The Consulate, 1799-1804

pp. 398-402

##### A. The Consulate

1. Napoleon was unscrupulous, seeing the world as a flux to be organized by a man of genius. He had an extra-ordinary intellect, with great tenacity, memory. He also had the ability to lead men; he dazzled, inspired confidence. He had a quick grasp of problems and the ability to make rapid decisions. In many ways he was the last and greatest of the enlightened despots.
2. Napoleon easily won a plebiscite, giving himself a mandate. He began by making peace. Russia had pulled back from the war, leaving only Austria--which he defeated decisively. In 1802 he made peace with Britain. At home, he created a secret police and a centralized administrative machine. He ended the Vendée rebellions. He granted amnesty to all exiles, of left and right. He required only that his officials be loyal to him, and he chose them from the full spectrum. **Talleyrand**, an ex-bishop with a long pedigree and no principles, became his foreign minister. Enemies of his new order were ruthlessly suppressed.

B. The Settlement with the Church; Other Reforms

1. Napoleon signed a Concordat with the Vatican in 1801 giving the Pope the right to depose bishops or discipline clergy, and he allowed the reopening of seminaries. The Pope recognized the Republic and accepted the loss of church lands. Clergy were promised state salaries. Thus he defused counter-revolution.
  2. He created a modern state, eliminating feudal ideas. Promotion was by talent alone: “careers open to talent.” Schools were reorganized; education became the key to social standing. Public finances and expenditures were rationalized, with a sound currency and public credit secured (possible because the Directory had repudiated the old currency and debt). He established a new Bank of France. The Napoleonic Code, provided judicial uniformity and equal rights, though criminal law supported the government over the individual and clearly recognized male dominance. Overall, the Code “set the character of France as it has been ever since: socially bourgeois, legally equalitarian, and administratively bureaucratic.”
- C. The Revolution was over, its beneficiaries secure and the working class movement gone. France was at peace at home, with its neighbors, with the Pope. Napoleon was soon to be Emperor. Yet France was still a revolutionary terror to Europe. France was larger, more powerful, and it willing to use its power to change Europe. French troops were soon to march across Europe in the name of “Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity.”