

# The French Revolution

## Introduction

In the 1700s France was, due to the Enlightenment, the most advanced nation in Western Europe. It boasted a large population (about 26 million) and excellent trading opportunities. However it was also a time of great unrest, mostly caused by high prices, high taxes and questions raised during the Enlightenment by Frenchmen such as Rousseau and Voltaire.

France was still ruled under a system of feudalism, dating back to the Middle Ages. It was the **Old Regime** and the people were divided into three large social classes called **estates**.

<b>Estate</b>	<b>Members</b>	<b>Details</b>
<b>FIRST</b>	<b>Roman Catholic Church</b> (Privileged Estate)	Owned about 10% of the land in France. Provided education and relief services to the poor. Paid about 2% of its income to the government
<b>SECOND</b>	<b>Rich Nobles</b> (Privileged Estate)	Most of their wealth was by owning land. They were only 2% of the population but owned about 20% of the land. Paid little or no taxes
<b>THIRD</b>	<b>Rest of Population</b> 98% of the population of France. Divided into three groups: 1. <b>Bourgeoisie</b> – merchants and artisans 2. <b>Workers</b> – cooks, servants etc. Low wages, unemployment rate was high 3. <b>Peasants</b> – the largest group in the Third Estate, more than 80% of the population	Paid the majority of the taxes. Lacked most basic privileges. Had little or no social status  Peasants paid over half of their income to the nobles, tithes to the church and taxes to the king.

The Enlightenment brought about new ideas about power and authority in government. The success of the American Revolution brought hope to the French people. They began to question the structure of their “Absolute” society by using words such as **equality, liberty and democracy** in their slogans for freedom. The people now openly discussed the ideas of Rousseau and Voltaire and the growing resentments of the lower classes were looking for change, looking for a revolution!

## Economic Problems

The population of France was expanding rapidly but the increasing taxes charged by the government made it almost impossible to run a business at a profit. The cost of living rose for everyone.

During the 1780s France suffered bad weather which caused widespread crop failures and a nationwide shortage of grain. In 1789 the price of a loaf of bread doubled and many faced starvation.

## Weak Leader

A strong leader might have avoided a national crisis but the new king, Louis XVI was indecisive and left many national matters unattended. Louis XVI never wanted to be king of France. He came to the throne in 1774 at the age of 19. When he was 15, he was married to Marie Antoinette who was only 14 at the time. She was not liked by the French people. She was a member of the royal family of Austria, a long-time enemy of France. Together, as the royal family, they did little to gain the popularity of the French people. Louis XVI would pay no attention to his government advisors. He preferred to spend his time hunting or playing with locks. Marie Antoinette spent so much money on clothing, jewels, and gifts that she became known as *Madame Deficit*.



Louis XVI



Marie Antoinette

## Economic Crisis

Rather than cut expenses and raise taxes Louis XVI put off dealing with this national emergency until France was nearly bankrupt. Upon hearing about the debt he tried to tax the aristocrats. In response, his Second Estate forced him to call a meeting of the **Estates-General**, an assembly of representatives from all three estates. The goal was to obtain approval for tax reform. Reluctantly, Louis XVI held the meeting on May 5, 1789, at the palace of Versailles. It was the first time in 175 years that the Estates-General had convened.

During the Middle Ages the clergy and nobles dominated the Estates-General, and expected to do so again in 1789. Under the ancient rules of the assembly, each estate's delegates met in a separate hall to vote, and each estate had one vote. This system was therefore biased as the two privileged estates (First and Second) could always out-vote the Third Estate.

The delegates from the Third Estate were mostly those of the bourgeoisie class. Their views had been changed by the Enlightenment and now they were eager to make rapid changes within the government. They insisted that all three estates meet together in one large room, and each delegate have one vote. This would give a critical advantage to the Third Estate as they had as many delegates as the First and Second Estates combined.

Siding with his nobles, Louis XVI ordered the Estates-General to follow the old rules and meet in separate rooms. This outraged the Third Estate. Led by **Abbé Sieyès**, their spokesman, he proclaimed:

***“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”.***

At the end of his dramatic speech he suggested that the Third Estate delegates name themselves the **National Assembly** and pass new laws and reforms in the name of the French people.

The Third Estate voted overwhelmingly to adopt the ideas of Sieyès and on June 17, 1789 the National Assembly was formed, proclaiming the end of absolute monarchy in France and the beginning of a new, representative government. This vote of agreement was to become the first deliberate act of the revolution.

Three days later, the Third Estate delegates were locked out of their meeting room by the present government. In response, they broke down the door to an indoor tennis court, vowing to stay there until they had written a new constitution for France. Their pledge was called the **Tennis Court Oath.**

In response to this new National Assembly, Louis XVI ordered his nobles and clergy to join the assembly. At the same time, sensing trouble in the near future, the king ordered his mercenary army of Swiss guards to occupy the city streets of Paris. Because of the new National Assembly, Louis XVI no longer trusted the loyalty of his French soldiers.

Within the city of Paris rumors started that foreign troops were being sent to massacre the citizens. People began to gather whatever weapons they could find to defend themselves from the king's foreign troops. On July 14<sup>th</sup> a mob of irate citizens began to attack the **Bastille**. It was a prison-fortress within the city of Paris, home to several hundred inmates who had been falsely imprisoned and an arsenal for gunpowder, an item badly needed if the people were to defend themselves against the foreign soldiers. The mob broke down the doors, overwhelmed the guards, took the gunpowder, freed the prisoners and then set fire to the building.

The fall of the Bastille became a great symbolic act of the revolution to the French people. Ever since that day in 1789, July 14<sup>th</sup> - **Bastille Day** - has become French Independence day.



The Storming of the Bastille

Before long the rebellion spread from Paris into the French countryside. From one village to the next, wild rumors circulated that the nobles were hiring outlaws to terrorize the peasants. A wave of senseless panic, called the **Great Fear**, rolled through France. When the peasants met no enemy bandits, they became outlaws themselves. Waving pitchforks and carrying lit torches, they broke into nobles' manor houses and tore up the old legal papers that bound them to pay feudal taxes. (Later, this would be a problem as they had destroyed their only forms of identification). In many instances they also burnt down their nobles' manor houses.

In October, 1789, approximately 6,000 Parisian women protested and rioted over the rising price of bread. Their anger quickly turned against the king and queen. The women marched through the streets of Paris and an additional 12 miles, in the pouring rain, to the **Palace of Versailles**. They broke into the palace and killed two guards. The women demanded that Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette come to Paris. It was now that Marie Antoinette was claimed to have asked what the women were doing at the palace. She was told that they were rioting about the price of bread. She was reported to have said that instead of bread, "*let them eat cake.*"

After a brief stand-off, the king finally agreed to take his wife and children to Paris. Three hours later, the king, his family and their entourage of almost 60,000 people joined the women and left for Paris. It was to be the last time that the king and queen were to see their magnificent palace. Their exit signaled the change of power and radical reforms about to overtake France.

During their return the women sang that they were bringing "*the baker, the baker's wife, and the baker's lad*" to Paris. They expected the king, ("*the baker*") to provide bread to stop the hunger within the city. Revolutionary leaders would later honor these women as heroines of the Revolution.



Women leading the march to the palace

Peasants were not the only citizens afraid of the Great Fear. The nobles and the clergy were equally afraid. During the night of August 4, 1789, some of the nobles and clergymen joined the National Assembly, making a treaty of equality between members of all three estates. Three weeks later, on August 27<sup>th</sup>, the National Assembly adopted a series of revolutionary ideals called “**A Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen**” which was commonly called the **Declaration of the Rights of Man**.

Part of the document stated:-

*“men are born and remain free and equal in rights” and that  
“the aim of all political association is the preservation of the  
natural rights of man. These rights are liberty, prosperity,  
security and resistance to oppression.”*

Other articles of this famous document guaranteed citizens equal justice, freedom of speech, and freedom of religion.

Within these statements came the slogan for the revolution: “**Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.**”

The Declaration of the Rights of Man did not apply to women. When **Olympe de Gouges** wrote a **Declaration of the Rights of Women**, her challenge against male authority and her demands for equality took her to jail and eventually she was executed as an enemy of the Revolution.

## State-Controlled Church

The National Assembly took over church lands and declared that all church officials and priests were to be elected by the property owners and paid as state officials. This meant that the Catholic Church lost its lands and, most importantly, its political independence. The bourgeoisie were strong supporters of the Revolution so they could not be further taxed. Therefore the assembly delegates chose to sell off the church lands to pay for France's national debt.

These actions were not well received by the millions of devout French Catholic peasants. In a show of support, they rallied behind their local priests to protest their demotions. Even though the National Assembly tried to make the Catholic Church part of the state, the peasants still believed that the pope should still rule over a church that was independent of the state. These actions divided the peasants and the bourgeoisie and from this time onwards, the French peasants opposed any further revolutionary changes.

While the National Assembly tried to change the relationship between church and state, the king, Louis XVI tried to escape from France. Many of his supporters had already left the country. In June 1791, Louis and his family tried to escape to the Austrian Netherlands. Unfortunately he was recognized at the border by a postmaster and he was returned to France under armed guard. Of note is that he was recognized from his portrait on the man's paper money!

## The Legislative Assembly

The National Assembly argued for two years while creating a new constitution. By 1791 there were several new changes:-

**There was now a limited constitutional monarchy. The king was stripped of most of his authority and the power to make laws was now in the hands of the Legislative Assembly. The king and his ministers still held executive power to enforce laws but France's assemblymen were now the lawmakers.**

In September 1791, the new constitution was completed. Louis XVI reluctantly signed the document and handed his power over to the newly created **Legislative Assembly**. They now had the power to create laws and to approve or prevent any war the king could or would declare on any other nation.

Despite the new government, there were still old problems remaining within the country. There were still food shortages and the national debt had barely been reduced. The Revolution's leaders began to turn against each other and the masses still called out for more liberty, more equality and more bread.

## Format of the Legislative Assembly

The assembly was split into three general groups, each of which sat in a different part of the meeting hall.

The diagram below is a summary of the arrangements within the meeting hall.

<b>The Legislative Assembly</b>		
<b>Radicals</b>	<b>Moderates</b>	<b>Conservatives</b>
<p>The “<b>sans-culottes</b>” (those without knee breeches, they wore trousers)</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>LEFT-WING</u></b></p> <p>Sat on the left hand side of the hall and said to be “<b>on the left</b>”</p> <p>The most radical group, consisting of Parisian wage-earners and small shopkeepers. Wanted a greater voice in government, lower food prices and an end to food shortages</p> <p>Opposed the king and the idea of a monarchy</p> <p>Wanted sweeping changes in government and proposed that common people have full power in a republic.</p>	<p>The “<b>centrists</b>”</p> <p>Sat in the center of the hall</p> <p>Wanted some changes in government but not as many as the radicals.</p>	<p>The “<b>Émigrès</b>” nobles and others who had previously fled France and returned.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>RIGHT-WING</u></b></p> <p>Sat on the right hand side of the hall and said to be “<b>on the right</b>”</p> <p>They hoped to undo the Revolution and restore the Old Regime.</p> <p>Upheld the idea of a limited monarchy</p> <p>Wanted only a few changes in government</p>

## France at War

In 1792 many European countries feared that the changes that were taking place in France would soon spread to their countries. Austria and Prussia demanded that Louis XVI be put back on the throne immediately. The Legislative Assembly responded by declaring war against Austria in April 1792. Prussia then allied with Austria and the three nations were at war.

The war began badly for France. By the summer of 1792 enemy armies were close to Paris. On July 25<sup>th</sup> the Prussian commander threatened to destroy Paris if any of the royal family were harmed. This statement enraged the Parisians. On August 10 about 20,000 men and women invaded the **Tuileries**, the royal palace where Louis XVI and his family were staying. The king's Swiss guard of 900 men were massacred, the royal family now jailed in a stone tower.

During the summer of 1792 the people of Paris learnt that their troops on the front line were involved in heavy fighting against the Prussians and were close to retreating. Reinforcements were about to leave the city to push back the enemy when rumors circulated that the royalists imprisoned in Paris were preparing to escape and seize control of the city. For several days in early September, the Parisians raided the prisons and murdered over 1,000 royalist prisoners.

Upon hearing this news the Legislative Assembly gave up the idea of a limited monarchy. They discontinued ruling the nation under the Constitution of 1791, declared the king deposed, and dissolved the assembly. They immediately called for the election of a new legislature.

The new government, elected in September, called itself the **National Convention**. At the same time this new government office, news came from the front that a French army had just won a decisive battle against the Austrians and Prussians. For a short time France was out of danger from an invasion.

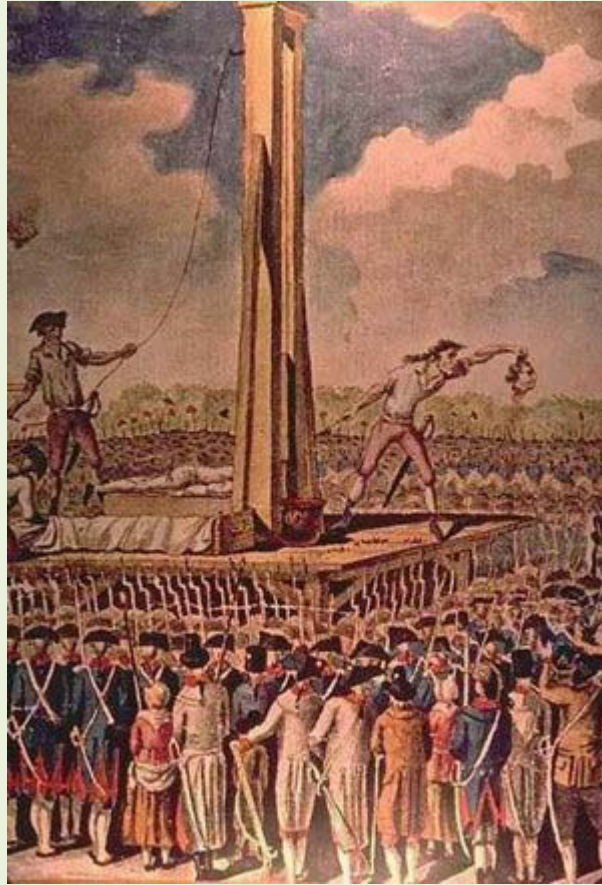
## Mobs Take to the Streets

During the summer of 1792 mobs controlled the city streets. They were led by the bourgeoisie but the majority of the people were from the poor class. Both men and women began joining political clubs. The most radical of these clubs was the **Jacobin Club**. The Jacobins wanted to remove the king and establish a republic in France.

One of the most prominent radical leaders was **Jean Paul Marat** who had written several editorials calling for "*five or six hundred heads to be cut off*" which, in his opinion, would rid France of the enemies of the Revolution. (He was later tried and beheaded as a traitor!).

The National Convention met in Paris on September 21<sup>st</sup> and quickly abolished the monarchy and declared France a republic. The delegates reduced the role of Louis XVI to that of a common citizen and a prisoner. The Jacobin Club tried Louis XVI for treason and found him guilty. By a very close vote, they sentenced him to death. **On January 21, 1793** the ex-king walked with calm dignity up the steps of the scaffolding and was beheaded at the **guillotine**.





Louis XVI loses his head at the guillotine

## War Continues

During the first months of 1793, Great Britain, Holland and Spain joined Prussia and Austria in the war against France. These nations formed the **First Coalition**. The French army, against such forces, began to suffer several military defeats.

The Jacobin leaders, in response to the coalition, drafted a new army of 300,000 French citizens, all between the ages of 18 and 40. By 1794 the French army had grown to 800,000 and within these ranks were many women.

## Reign of Terror

The foreign armies were not the only enemy of the new French republic. The Jacobins had thousands of domestic enemies – the peasants who would not accept the new government controls and rebelled against the beheadings at the guillotine of the king and priests.

Many would-be leaders struggled for power but in the end **Maximilien Robespierre** appeared at the forefront and began to build his “**republic of virtue.**” His party members began to erase every trace of France’s past monarchy and nobility.

No household was safe under the reign of Robespierre. If your last name was Leroy (king) you quickly changed your name. Playing cards were even changed so they would no longer contain kings, queens and jacks!

The radicals even changed the national calendar – they divided the year into 12 months each of 30 days and renamed each month. The new calendar did not contain any Sundays – it was because Sunday was a day of religion and now old-fashioned. All the churches in Paris and soon, all over France, were closed.

During the summer of 1793, Robespierre became the leader of the **Committee of Public Safety**. This gave him the power to decide who should be an enemy of the republic and who was an ally. The committee put people on trial in the morning and then beheaded them at the guillotine the same afternoon!

From July 1793 to July 1794, Robespierre governed France as a dictator, the period now named the **Reign of Terror**. The most famous victim of Robespierre was the widowed queen, Marie Antoinette. Remaining calm and dignified she was forced to ride through the streets of Paris in a horse and cart to her demise. Along the way she was jeered by the crowds that gathered along the route. On the guillotine scaffold she accidentally stepped on her executioner's foot and said her last words: "*Monsieur, I beg your pardon. I did not do it on purpose.*"

In October 1793 the revolutionary courts pronounced death sentences on many of the leaders who first helped set up the French republic. Their only crime was that they were not radical enough. One of these people was Jean Paul Marat. In addition to these political figures, thousands of unknown people were beheaded. An 18 year old boy was sentenced to death for chopping down a tree that was originally planted as a symbol of liberty. An inn keeper was executed for selling sour wine to "the defenders of the country."

During the Reign of Terror approximately 3,000 people were executed within the city of Paris. In total, about 40,000 people were killed across the nation, about 85% of them being peasants or members of the urban poor – common people for whom the Revolution was carried out.

In July 1794 the members of the National Convention, in order to save their own lives, turned against Robespierre. They arrested him and on July 28, 1794 Robespierre was executed at the guillotine. The Reign of Terror had ended. The French shifted their public opinion over to the right, now advocating for only a few changes within the government and having a limited monarchy rule the nation.

In 1795, moderate leaders in the National Convention drafted a new constitution which placed the powers of government solely in the hands of the upper middle class. A new, two-house legislature was put into effect and a new executive body of five men was created, known as the **Directory**. These five directors of the Directory were moderates, not revolutionary idealists.

Even though the Directory members turned out to be corrupt, they did install a time of peace and order within the French nation. In addition, the Directory found the right general to command the armies of France. The young man they nominated was **Napoleon Bonaparte**.