

French Revolution

Overall Causes:

- Writings of the Enlightenment about natural rights, social equality, and political authority.
- The imbalances in the political, social, and economic (tax) structure of France.
- General dissatisfaction with the Catholic Church as an institution and the clergy as an “estate” for its political power, land ownership, and privileges.
- A growing urban working class who faced hardship due to increases in cost of living.
- Outdated property system that still resembled feudalism.
- Near financial bankruptcy of the government: 50% of government revenue went to pay the interest on the public debt and 25% went to maintain the military.
- Transfers of allegiance: Louis XVI supported the conservative nobility, while the liberal members of the First and Second Estate supported the Third Estate.

Social Causes:

- First Estate** = Clergy (1% of population, owned 10% of the land)
 - exempt from the *taille*
 - collects a 4% tax (tithe)
- Second Estate** = Nobility (2% of population, owned 25% of the land)
 - exempt from the *taille*
 - 40% of the nobles had purchased their nobility within the last 150 years (nobility of the robe)
 - older noble families (nobility of the sword) sought to curb the rate of increase in nobility
- Third Estate** = Everyone Else: 97% of population with varying levels of wealth and education.
 - Bourgeoisie (8% of population, owned 25% of land)
 - bankers, merchant-capitalists, and professionals (lawyers and doctors)
 - Petty bourgeoisie: artisans, shopkeepers, and small business owners
 - sans culottes*: lower class, urban wage laborers
 - Peasants: (75% of population, owned 40% of land)

Political Causes:

- The conflict between the nobility and the monarchy was a fundamental political cause of the revolution.
- The nobility wanted a limited, constitutional monarchy modeled after Great Britain, but the monarchy clung to absolutism.
- The *lettres de cachet* allowed the king to arrest and imprison any individual without judicial procedures.

Intellectual Causes:

- The ideas of Voltaire, Rousseau, Montesquieu, and other *philosophes* provided systematic tools for the expression of grievances towards the Old Regime.
- A century of Enlightenment thought created a public concern over political issues, awareness of social issues, and a spirit of criticism.
- The Enlightenment did not *cause* the revolution, but Enlightenment ideas were applied by the participants of the revolution.

Economic Causes:

- France experienced long-term economic growth, but the wealth was extremely unequally distributed.
- France was plagued by a **regressive tax system**.
- France was in debt due to expensive wars against Great Britain and royal extravagance.
- The nobles refused to compromise on taxes until the monarchy compromised on political reforms.
- Bread prices soared during 1787-1789, which caused urban riots.

The Liberal Phase (1789-1791)

- In 1788, **Louis XVI** called for a meeting of the **Estates General** to be held in May 1789
- Prior to the meeting of the Estates General, *cahiers des doléances* were formulated throughout France by representatives of each Estate to state their grievances.
 - Most of the grievances demanded tax equality and the abolition of feudalism
 - Therefore, the public fully expected political reform to result
- The Estates General, upon meeting, began to disagree over representation and voting procedures: Conservative aristocrats wanted each Estate to have the same number of representatives, even though the Third Estate represented 97% of the population, and insisted that each Estate vote as a bloc (one vote for each Estate). Ultimately, the Third Estate was doubled in size, but the conservative aristocrats still fought to promote bloc voting, which would allow the First Estate and Second Estate to defeat the Third Estate on any given issue. Liberal aristocrats, known as the **Committee of Thirty**, supported the Third Estate and **Abbe Sieyès** published a pamphlet titled *What Is the Third Estate?* in defense of the political rights of the Third Estate. No agreement was reached on voting procedure.
- June 17, 1789: The Third Estate, along with liberal members of the First and Second Estates, declared itself the **National Assembly**, *the first political act of the revolution*.
- Louis XVI responded by locking the Third Estate out of the Estates General.
- June 20, 1789: The National Assembly convened in a tennis court and pledged to write a new constitution for France. This event is known as the **Tennis Court Oath**.
- Louis XVI capitulated and ordered that all members of the First and Second Estates join the National Assembly, and that voting would take place by head rather than by Estate.

-The National Assembly renamed itself the **National Constituent Assembly** in reference to its intention to write a constitution.

-Louis XVI allied himself with the conservative aristocrats within the National Constituent Assembly who opposed the creation of a constitutional monarchy.

-Louis XVI ordered 18,000 troops to occupy Versailles and Paris, and he removed the popular finance minister **Jacques Necker**, a supporter of the Third Estate.

-The people of Paris feared that the troops had been called to undermine the National Constituent Assembly, so the people began stockpiling guns and formed a militia.

-July 14, 1789: The people of Paris attacked and occupied the Bastille fortress (now a state prison) in order to obtain ammunition, which was seen as *the symbolic start of the revolution*.

-The **Fall of the Bastille** saved the National Constituent Assembly and demonstrated the power of mob violence, which would become a regular feature of the revolution.

-The militia in Paris evolved into the **National Guard** led by the American Revolution hero the **Marquis de Lafayette**.

-July 19 to August 3, 1789: Peasant revolts (also referred to as the **Great Fear**) swept through the French countryside, which consisted of physical attacks against noble manors and the feudal system itself.

-August 4, 1789: The National Constituent Assembly voted to abolish feudalism. Influential aristocrats and clergy renounced their privileges and the social structure of the Old Regime was dismantled.

-August 26, 1789: The National Constituent Assembly adopted a set of guiding political principles called the **Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen**, which granted civic equality to all *men*, freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and equal justice. It stated that the government's role was to protect the natural rights of liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression. The document was articulated in abstract, universal terms that could be applied to other countries, as well.

-October 5, 1789: 7,000 armed women marched on **Versailles** to demand bread, and the royal family was forced to move to Paris. This event is referred to as the **Bread March of the Women**, which sparked the **October Days**.

-The National Constituent Assembly abolished all feudal institutions, *parlements*, estates, laws, tariffs, and taxes, and completely restructured France into 83 equal **departments**, subdivided into districts and communes.

-France now possessed a centralized national government based in Paris, and a locally elected council would govern each department, which were dominated by the bourgeoisie rather than the nobility.

-July 1790: The National Constituent Assembly adopted the **Civil Constitution of the Clergy**, which placed the Catholic Church under the control of the government. Church officials would be elected by the property-owners in each diocese and would be paid by the government. The government confiscated all land owned by the Catholic Church and required all priests to swear an oath of allegiance to the revolution.

-Those clergy who refused to swear allegiance became known as the **refractory clergy**; they and laypersons opposed to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy became a source of counter-revolution.

-February 1791: **Pope Pius VI** condemned the Civil Constitution of the Clergy and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. The Catholic Church went on the offensive against the revolution in France and political liberalism more generally.

-June 1791: The National Constituent Assembly adopted the **Constitution of 1791**, which created a constitutional monarchy with a unicameral legislature. The Constitution distinguished between “**active**” **citizens**, those who owned a specific amount of property or who paid a specific amount of taxes (wealthy people), and “**passive**” **citizens**, those who were working class or *female*. The Constitution of 1791 effectively transferred power from the aristocracy to the wealthy bourgeoisie = “upper-middle class reform.”

-June 14, 1791: The National Constituent Assembly passed the **Chapelier Law**, which forbade workers’ associations (unions).

-June 20, 1791: Louis XVI attempted to flee France, the “**Flight to Varennes**,” but was stopped before leaving the country.

-July 17, 1791: A crowd gathered in Paris to demand the overthrow of the monarchy and the establishment of a **republic** based on popular sovereignty. The National Guard led by Lafayette dispersed the crowd with gunfire and killed 50 people in what is referred to as the **Champs de Mars Massacre**, which further radicalized public discontent with the “upper-middle class reform.”

-Political culture in France began to openly embrace the idea of **revolution** and the **Jacobins**, a republican group, grew in influence and produced many of the most important leaders of the radical phase of the revolution. They were inspired by the more radical republican thought of Rousseau, who emphasized equality, popular sovereignty, and civic virtue.

-By the summer of 1791, the revolution was being both criticized and celebrated outside of France.

Edmund Burke condemned the radical destruction of France’s traditions and predicted in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) that the revolution would end in military dictatorship. **Thomas Paine** defended the revolution in *The Rights of Man* (1791). Most importantly, **Olympe de Gouges** composed the *Declaration of the Rights of Woman* demanding that women be regarded as citizens. She was criticizing the National Constituent Assembly based on its own expressed values by demanding that its political principles be universalized to include women. **Leopold II** of Austria and **Frederick William II** of Prussia issued the **Declaration of Pillnitz**, which promised to intervene in France on behalf of the royal family.

The Radical Phase (1792-1794)

-October 1, 1791: The **Legislative Assembly**, the unicameral legislature created by the Constitution of 1791, assembled for the first time.

-The Legislative Assembly was dominated by a group of Jacobins called **Girondists**, who considered themselves international revolutionaries whose duty it was to spread revolutionary ideas across Europe.

- April 1792: The Girondists led a movement within the Legislative Assembly to declare war on Austria. Prussia joins Austria in opposition to France.
- July 1792: Austria and Prussia, winning the war, issue the **Brunswick Manifesto**, which threatens Paris with destruction if the monarchy is harmed. The people distrust both the monarchy and the Legislative Assembly.
- The working class of Paris, the *sans-culottes*, opposed the agenda of the Girondists and tended to support the more radical ideas expressed by the journalist **Jean-Paul Marat** in his paper *L'Ami du peuple* (**The Friend of the People**). Meanwhile, the politician **Georges Danton** organized a radical group *sans-culottes* called the **Paris Commune**, which rejected the constitutional monarchy and publically promoted the creation of a republic.
- August 1792: Armed mobs hold the royal family hostage and force the Legislative Assembly to suspend the monarchy and call for the election of delegates to a new constitutional convention. This event marks *the political beginning of the second revolution, or the radical phase*.
- The delegates elected to the new constitutional convention are called the **National Convention**.
- September 1792: Fearing that political prisoners will aid the invading Austrian-Prussian army, revolutionaries massacred those inside the prisons, and many innocent bystanders. This event is known as the **September Massacres**.
- September 21, 1792: The National Convention assembles and French forces defeat Prussia in the **Battle of Valmy**. The National Convention abolishes the monarchy and declares France a **republic**.
- The National Convention was dominated by the *sans-culottes* who were hostile to the leaders of the revolution of 1789, accusing them of simply wanting to share power with the aristocracy. They were anti-monarchical, intensely republican, and advocated a community of small property owners who would participate directly in politics (Rousseau).
- The National Convention split into factions with the Girondists favoring an unregulated economy and reflecting the wealthier interests of the bourgeoisie, while the radical *sans-culottes* allied with the Mountain (middle-class Parisians) in opposition.
- December 1792: King Louis XVI was put on trial for conspiring against the liberty of the people (treason) and the Mountain and *sans-culottes* defeated the Girondists in deciding the outcome of the trial.
- January 21, 1793: Louis XVI is executed by guillotine.
- March 1793: Counter-revolutionary revolt led by aristocratic military officers and priests erupted in western France, referred to as **Vendean rebellion**.
- The National Convention outlawed slavery in French colonies, abolished imprisonment for debt, abolished primogeniture, and created the first citizens' army in Europe, or national military draft (*levee en mass*).
- The National Convention declared that it would aid all peoples who wished to cast off aristocratic and monarchical oppression.
- External Threats: Austria, Prussia, Great Britain, Spain, and Portugal formed a defensive alliance against France in order to protect their social, economic, and political structures.

-Internal Threats: Clergy who rejected the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, many were appalled by the execution of Louis XVI, some peasants in the countryside revolted against the military draft, and wealthier bourgeoisie opposed the radical direction of the National Convention.

-The leaders within the National Convention became extremely paranoid about the fate of the revolution and began taking extreme actions to preserve the revolution's gains.

-Maximilien **Robespierre** led the National Convention during this time in what would be referred to as the **Reign of Terror**.

-July 1793: Robespierre formed the **Committee of Public Safety** to judge suspected internal enemies of the republic and mobilize the people to defeat the foreign enemies, as well.

-The Reign of Terror involved mass executions of "**enemies of the republic**," including Marie Antoinette, Georges Danton, Olympe de Gouges, and thousands of peasants, *sans-culottes*, and bourgeoisie. Many of the victims were people for whom the revolution had supposedly been fought, but the executions were particularly heavy in the regions that participated in the Vendean rebellion.

-Due process was suspended and suspects could be found guilty without substantial evidence after Robespierre passed the **Law of 22 Prairial**.

-Robespierre insisted that the extreme measures were necessary to protect a fragile republic, one that he described as a "**republic of virtue**." Inspired by **Rousseau**, the leaders of the National Convention insisted that people uphold the public over the private good, and the support of the general will over individual interests.

-The National Convention formally excluded women from political activity, de-Christianized French society, and used tribunals to dispense justice to alleged enemies.

-October 1793: The National Convention adopted a new calendar that dated time from the birth of the republic and removed both Christian holidays and Sundays, subdividing each month into 10-day weeks.

-November 1793: The National Convention declared Notre Dame Cathedral the "**Temple of Reason**" where the **Cult of the Supreme Being** would inculcate a civic religion devoted to the republic (Rousseau).

-Churches were destroyed, and priests and nuns were killed, resulting in enormous popular opposition within the countryside towards the government in Paris.

-July 1794: Robespierre, having executed both radical, moderate, and counter-revolutionary "enemies of the republic" found himself increasingly opposed within the National Convention. Ultimately, he and 80 of his supporters were guillotined.

-The execution of Robespierre ended the Reign of Terror and signaled a shift away from radicalism. This shift is called the **Thermidorian Reaction**.

Moderate Phase (1794-1797)

-The National Convention allowed the Girondists to return to power and they repealed the Law of 22 Prairial.

-The Paris Commune was outlawed and its *sans-culottes* leaders were executed.

- The Jacobins were forbidden from participating in the National Convention and some who had participated in the Reign of Terror were murdered. This event is called the “**White Terror.**”
- Catholicism was revived within France and traditional family structures were reinforced.
- March 1795: The **Treaty of Basel** established peace with Prussia and Spain.
- August 1795: The National Convention adopted the **Constitution of the Year III**, which rejected both constitutional monarchy and democracy. The new constitution created a bicameral legislature: **Council of Elders** (upper) and **Council of Five Hundred** (lower). The executive was a five-person council called the **Directory**. The National Convention, however, required that 2/3 of the members of the Council of Five Hundred be representatives from the existing National Convention.
- October 1795: **Napoleon Bonaparte** crushed a royalist uprising in Paris and saved the National Convention.
- Spring 1796: **Gracchus Babeuf** led the **Conspiracy of Equals**, a movement opposed to the **Two-Thirds Law**, and advocated equality of property and radical democracy.
- Babeuf argued that the wealthy monopolized both property and political power, which was arguably correct. He was arrested, tried, and executed.
- France remained at war with Austria and Great Britain and the Directory relied on the military to maintain political and social stability.
- September 1797: Elections resulted in a legislative majority for royalists who intended to restore the Bourbon monarchy, but the Directory and Napoleon Bonaparte cancelled the results and maintained power in a *coup d'état*.
- France was ripe for an ambitious and successful military leader to overthrow the Directory and restore order and leadership. Napoleon's power would only increase as he achieved military success abroad and the Directory continued to govern ineffectively at home.
- October 1799: Continued economic troubles led to discontent with the Directory and Abbe Sieyes proposed a new constitution that would divide executive authority among three consuls. He appealed to Napoleon for support and together they carried out another *coup d'état*.
- December 1799: **Napoleon** usurped sole executive authority and issued the **Constitution of the Year VIII**, which made him **First Consul**.
- The Consulate officially ended the revolutionary process in France.
- The French Revolution is credited with introducing liberalism and nationalism to Europe. During the revolution these two ideas complemented each other. Liberalism was essentially constitutionalism, natural rights, and popular sovereignty, while nationalism was the idea that citizens have devotion to the nation and defend it through a citizen's army. Both liberalism and nationalism would take root throughout Europe as the French army under the leadership of Napoleon spread the Enlightenment at the tip of a sword to the conservative, aristocratic, and monarchical governments who had been opposed to the revolution since its beginning in 1789.

Model of Revolution and Reform

- Stage 1 The first indication of rising discontent is the activity of writers who denounce existing conditions and satirize common practices. The writers provide new goals and ideas.
- Stage 2 Public dissatisfaction culminates in marches, riots, occupations, assassinations, and other acts of violent or non-violent direct action.
- Stage 3 The ruling group is intimidated into making repeated concessions until the agenda begins to reflect the values of the reformers, and ultimately power is transferred to the reformers.
- Stage 4 The reformers carry out their ideas and the political agenda reflects their priorities.
- Stage 5 The new reforms divide the nation into rival groups.
- Stage 6 Radicals or reactionaries seize power and attempt to impose their agenda on the nation.
- Stage 7 The public tires of the ruling group, thus allowing moderates to regain power and restore order and balance between conflicting values.