

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION (1789–1799)

1. Overview:

Historians agree unanimously that the French Revolution was a watershed event that changed Europe irrevocably, following in the footsteps of the American Revolution, which had occurred just a decade earlier. The causes of the French Revolution, though, are difficult to pin down: based on the historical evidence that exists, a fairly compelling argument could be made regarding any number of factors. Internationally speaking, a number of major wars had taken place in the forty years leading up to the Revolution, and France had participated, to some degree, in most of them. The Seven Years' War in Europe and the American Revolution across the ocean had a profound effect on the French psyche and made the Western world a volatile one. In addition to charging up the French public, this wartime environment took quite a toll on the French treasury. The costs of waging war, supporting allies, and maintaining the French army quickly depleted a French bank that was already weakened from royal extravagance. Finally, in a time of highly secularized Enlightenment, the idea that King Louis XVI had absolute power due to divine right—the idea that he had been handpicked by God—didn't hold nearly as much water as in the past few decades.

Ultimately, these various problems within late-1700s France weren't so much the immediate causes of the Revolution as they were the final catalyst. The strict French class system had long placed the clergy and nobility far above the rest of the French citizens, despite the fact that many of those citizens far exceeded nobles in wealth and reputation. Moreover, these exclusive titles—most of which had been purchased and passed down through families—essentially placed their bearers above the law and exempted them from taxes. In 1789, when France's ancient legislative body, the Estates-General, reconvened and it became apparent that the higher-ranking classes refused to forfeit their privileges in the interest of saving the country, the frustration of the French bourgeoisie reached its boiling point. The French Revolution was thus a battle to achieve equality and remove oppression—concerns far more deep-seated and universal than the immediate economic turbulence France was experiencing at the time.

It may seem on the surface that the immediate results of the French Revolution were negligible, for the next leader after the Revolution was Napoleon, who imposed a dictatorship of sorts, voiding the sovereign democracy of the Revolution. Nonetheless, the Revolution won the public a number of other victories, both tangible and intangible. No French ruler after the Revolution dared to reverse the property and rights acquisitions gained during the Revolution, so citizens who had purchased church land were allowed to keep it. The new tax system remained devoid of the influence of privilege, so that every man paid his share according to personal wealth. Moreover, the breakdown of church and feudal contracts freed people from tithes and other incurred fees. That's not to say that all was well: French industry struggled for years after the Revolution to regain a foothold in such a drastically different environment. On the whole, however, the French people had seen the impact they could have over their government, and that liberating, inspiring spirit was unlikely ever again to be suppressed.

Other European governments and rulers, however, were not too happy with the French after the Revolution. They knew that their own citizens had seen the power that the French public wielded, and as a result, those governments were never again able to feel secure in their rule after 1799. Though there had been other internal revolutions in European countries, few were as massive and convoluted as the French Revolution, which empowered citizens everywhere and resulted in a considerable leap toward the end of oppression throughout Europe.

common people.

France's Debt Problems

A number of ill-advised financial maneuvers in the late 1700s worsened the financial situation of the already cash-strapped French government. France's prolonged involvement in the Seven Years' War of 1756–1763 drained the treasury, as did the country's participation in the American Revolution of 1775–1783. Aggravating the situation was the fact that the government had a sizable army and navy to maintain, which was an expenditure of particular importance during those volatile times. Moreover, in the typical indulgent fashion that so irked the common folk, mammoth costs associated with the upkeep of King Louis XVI's extravagant palace at Versailles and the frivolous spending of the queen, Marie-Antoinette, did little to relieve the growing debt. These decades of fiscal irresponsibility were one of the primary factors that led to the French Revolution. France had long been recognized as a prosperous country, and were it not for its involvement in costly wars and its aristocracy's extravagant spending, it might have remained one.

Charles de Calonne

Finally, in the early 1780s, France realized that it had to address the problem, and fast. First, Louis XVI appointed Charles de Calonne controller general of finances in 1783. Then, in 1786, the French government, worried about unrest should it try to raise taxes on the peasants, yet reluctant to ask the nobles for money, approached various European banks in search of a loan. By that point, however, most of Europe knew the depth of France's financial woes, so the country found itself with no credibility.

Louis XVI asked Calonne to evaluate the situation and propose a solution. Charged with auditing all of the royal accounts and records, Calonne found a financial system in shambles. Independent accountants had been put in charge of various tasks regarding the acquisition and distribution of government funds, which made the tracking of such transactions very difficult. Furthermore, the arrangement had left the door wide open to corruption, enabling many of the accountants to dip into government funds for their own use. As for raising new money, the only system in place was taxation. At the time, however, taxation only applied to peasants. The nobility were tax-exempt, and the parlements would never agree to across-the-board tax increases.

The Assembly of Notables

Calonne finally convinced Louis XVI to gather the nobility together for a conference, during which Calonne and the king could fully explain the tenuous situation facing France. This gathering, dubbed the Assembly of Notables, turned out to be a virtual who's who of people who didn't want to pay any taxes. After giving his presentation, Calonne urged the notables either to agree to the new taxes or to forfeit their exemption to the current ones. Unsurprisingly, the notables refused both plans and turned against Calonne, questioning the validity of his work. He was dismissed shortly thereafter, leaving France's economic prospects even grimmer than before.

Revolution on the Horizon

By the late 1780s, it was becoming increasingly clear that the system in place under the Old Regime in France simply could not last. It was too irresponsible and oppressed too many people. Furthermore, as the result of the Enlightenment, secularism was spreading in France, religious thought was becoming divided, and the religious justifications for rule—divine right and absolutism—were losing credibility. The aristocracy and royalty, however, ignored these progressive trends in French thought and society. Rather, the royals and nobles adhered even more firmly to tradition and archaic law. As it would turn out, their intractability would cost them everything that they were trying to preserve.

The Storming of Tuileries

Just weeks later, on August 10, anti-monarchy Jacobins rallied together a loyal crew of sans-culottes that stormed Tuileries outright, trashing the palace and capturing Louis XVI and his family as they tried to escape. The mob then arrested the king for treason. A month after that, beginning on September 2, 1792, the hysterical sans-culottes, having heard rumors of counterrevolutionary talk, raided Paris's prisons and murdered more than 1,000 prisoners.

The Danger of the Sansculottes

If there was any indication throughout the Revolution that no governing body truly had control, it could be found with the sans-culottes. Members of this group were easily swayed and often fell into bouts of mob hysteria, which made them extraordinarily difficult to manage. The bourgeoisie groups "in charge" of the Revolution originally hoped to harness the power of the masses for their own bidding, but it soon became apparent that the sans-culottes were uncontrollable.

The Girondins, who had originally rallied the sans-culottes to their cause, quickly found that the rabble was more radical than they had expected. The massacres that began on September 2 revealed the true power of the sans-culottes and showed the chaos they were capable of creating. The group, after all, consisted of poor workers and peasants who wanted privilege outright eliminated. Despite all their contributions to the revolutionary cause, they still found themselves with little input into the government, which was dominated by bourgeoisie far richer than they. Having gained their freedom from monarchical oppression, the sans-culottes switched their cry from "Liberty!" to "Equality!"

Failures of the Legislative Assembly

Arguably, the Legislative Assembly's complacency in 1792 opened the door to the violence that followed. The assembly did have some cause to rest on its laurels: the Revolution had accomplished everything that had been desired, and the new government had a binder full of legislation to back it up. But the confidence bred by this success was misleading: the assembly had not organized an army that was capable of taking on the combined forces of Austria and Prussia, nor had it sufficiently calmed its own internal feuds. The new government was still far too unsteady even to consider going to war—yet it did and was soundly defeated. Even more peculiar was the fact that Brissot and his Girondin associates were radical enough to want to go to war, yet conservative enough to do so only under the rule of a constitutional monarch—the same monarch over whom the war was being fought. It was a baffling decision and left little question as to why the Jacobins and other more radical elements wanted to take control.

7. The Reign of Terror and the Thermidorian Reaction: 1792–1795:

Events

September 22, 1792 France is declared a republic

January 21, 1793 Louis XVI is executed

April 6 National Convention creates Committee of Public Safety

June 24 Constitution of 1793 is established

September 5 Reign of Terror begins; lasts more than ten months

September 29 Robespierre's Maximum implements ceiling on prices

October 16 Marie-Antoinette is executed

July 27, 1794 Robespierre is overthrown

The New National Convention

The National Convention in the era after Robespierre's downfall was significantly more conservative than it had been before and deeply entrenched in the values of the moderate middle class. The change was so drastic that once-powerful groups like the sans-culottes and Jacobins were forced underground, and sans-culottes even became a derisive term in France. Meanwhile, the French economy struggled during the winter of 1794–1795, and hunger became widespread.

Although the members of the convention worked diligently to try to establish a new constitution, they faced opposition at every turn. Because many sanctions against the churches had been revoked, the clergy—many of whom were still loyal to the royalty—started to return from exile. Likewise, the Comte de Provence, the younger brother of Louis XVI, declared himself next in line for the throne and, taking the name Louis XVIII, declared to France that royalty would return. (Hopeful French nobles in exile briefly referred to Louis XVI's young son as "Louis XVII," but the boy died in prison in June 1795.)

The Constitution of 1795 and the Directory

On August 22, 1795, the convention was finally able to ratify a new constitution, the Constitution of 1795, which ushered in a period of governmental restructuring. The new legislature would consist of two houses: an upper house, called the Council of Ancients, consisting of 250 members, and a lower house, called the Council of Five Hundred, consisting of 500 members. Fearing influence from the left, the convention decreed that two-thirds of the members of the first new legislature had to have already served on the National Convention between 1792 and 1795.

The new constitution also stipulated that the executive body of the new government would be a group of five officers called the Directory. Although the Directory would have no legislative power, it would have the authority to appoint people to fill the other positions within the government, which was a source of considerable power in itself. Annual elections would be held to keep the new government in check.

The dilemma facing the new Directory was a daunting one: essentially, it had to rid the scene of Jacobin influence while at the same time prevent royalists from taking advantage of the disarray and reclaiming the throne. The two-thirds rule was implemented for this reason, as an attempt to keep the same composition like that of the original, moderate-run National Convention. In theory, the new government closely resembled that of the United States, with its checks-and-balances system. As it turned out, however, the new government's priorities became its downfall: rather than address the deteriorating economic situation in the country, the legislature instead focused on keeping progressive members out. Ultimately, paranoia and attempts at overprotection weakened the group.

Napoleon and the French Army

Meanwhile, fortified by the Committee of Public Safety's conscription drive of 1793, the French army had grown significantly. While the foundation of the Directory was being laid, the army, having successfully defended France against invasion from Prussia and Austria, kept right on going, blazing its way into foreign countries and annexing land. During the period from 1795 to 1799 in particular, the French army was nearly unstoppable. Napoleon Bonaparte, a young Corsican in charge of French forces in Italy and then Egypt, won considerable fame for himself with a series of brilliant victories and also amassed massive reservoirs of wealth and support as he tore through Europe.

The Directory encouraged this French war effort across Europe, though less as a democratic crusade against tyranny than as a means of resolving the unemployment crisis in France. A large, victorious French army lowered unemployment within France and guaranteed soldiers a steady paycheck to buy the goods they needed to survive. The Directory hoped that this increase in income would encourage an increase in demand, reinvigorating the French economy.