

5 – The French Revolution, Napoleon, and the Congress of Vienna

Overview

In 1789, France had a population of about 25 million, a productive economy, rich farmlands, and a culture that dominated the Continent. French was not only the language of diplomacy, but it was the tongue spoken in most of the courts of Europe. France was the center of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Despite its wealth and influence, its government was corrupt, inefficient, and in debt, its class structure archaic and unjust, its institutions encrusted with medieval traditionalism. Smoldering class resentments stoked by the ideals and illusions of the Enlightenment, by financial turmoil and, finally, by famines brought on by bad harvests, erupted in revolution. The revolution began as a moderate attempt at reform, degenerated into radical bloodletting, then swung back to authoritarianism and a short flirtation with empire in search of order. Impelled by the ideals of “liberty, equality, fraternity” and by military power, the French Revolution became an international movement that overthrew the feudal structures of the Old Regime in France and shook the foundations of the political and social order in all of Europe.

Napoleon defined an age, 1799 to 1815. His genius for military success created, in less than a decade, a French empire that stretched across the Continent. His gift for administration and reform implemented the ideals of the Revolution. Ambition, growing nationalism throughout Europe, and unexpected events led to his downfall. He lost the cream of his magnificent army in the wasteland of the Russian winter; his campaigns arrayed most of Europe against him when his victories in the field awakened nationalism in the rest of Europe. After his fall in 1815, the “Old Order” tried to restore itself at the Congress of Vienna. A balance of power maintained relative peace for a century, but Europe had entered the Age of “-isms,” and powerful new social, economic, and political forces would redefine the Western World.

The French Revolution

The Old Regime

A class structure left over from the Middle Ages determined the political and social order of France:

The First Estate (>1 percent), the clergy, despite comprising a tiny fraction of the population, the Roman Catholic Church of France (Gallican Church) owned 20 percent of the land. The clergy and the Church were exempt from taxes.

The Second Estate (2-4 percent), the nobles, owned about 20 percent of the land. They were also exempt from taxes.

The Third Estate (95 percent), the middle class, urban artisans, and peasants. Although France had developed a significant commercial or middle class, the bourgeoisie, the mass of the people were peasants who lived on the land.

The Third Estate, especially the peasantry, was subjected to a variety of oppressive taxes:

- *taille*, a land tax
- *tithe*, a Church tax equivalent to 10 percent of annual income
- income tax
- poll tax
- salt tax
- local duties paid to the feudal lord

Personal freedom was jeopardized by the *lettre de cachet*, by which the government could imprison anyone without charges or trial. The bourgeoisie was disenchanted by its lack of influence in a system that it disproportionately supported.

Burdened by debts run up by the wars and extravagances of **Louis XIV** (r. 1643-1715), by the corruption and inefficiency of the administration of his successors, and by France's support of the American Revolution, the government of **Louis XVI** (r. 1774-1792) attempted to tax the previously exempt clergy and nobility. A high court of France, the *Parlement of Paris*, ruled that new taxes could not be levied unless approved by the Estates-General, the legislative body equivalent to a parliament, which had not met in 175 years, representing the three estates mentioned above.

Timeline: The First or Liberal Stage of the Revolution (1789-1792)

MAY 5, 1789: The Estates-General met in Versailles.

JUNE 13, 1789: Supported by a few members of the First Estate, the Third Estate broke a voting deadlock in the Estates-General by declaring itself the **National Assembly**.

JUNE 20, 1789: After being locked out of their meeting place by the king's troops, members of the National Assembly swore the "Tennis Court Oath" not to disband until they had written a new constitution for France.

JULY 14, 1789: After food riots in the cities, peasant rebellions in the countryside, and the inaction of Louis and his ministers, a Parisian mob stormed the **Bastille**, a fortress that symbolized royal injustice.

AUGUST 4, 1789: The Decrees of this date mark when the National Assembly **abolished feudalism and manorialism**.

AUGUST 26, 1789: *The Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* was passed. Freedom of speech, thought, and religion were guaranteed, as was due process of law; taxes could be imposed only by consent of the governed; the right to rule was said to belong not just to the king, but to the whole nation.

AUGUST 1789-1790: The "Great Fear" swept through the countryside as the Third Estate rose up against the nobility and destroyed feudal records and noble residences. This movement lent strength to the movement to end feudalism.

OCTOBER 1789: A Paris mob, mostly women, was incited by Jean Paul Marat to march on Versailles and force the king to relocate to the **Tuileries**, the royal residence in Paris. The National Assembly also went to Paris and was intimidated by the Parisians.

NOVEMBER 2, 1789: The Assembly seized Church and monastery lands for revenue.

1790: **The Civil Constitution of the Clergy** was drafted. Convents and monasteries were abolished; all clergymen were to be paid by the state and elected by all citizens; the clergy was forbidden to accept the authority of the pope. Alienated by this decree, half of the priests of the Gallican Church refused to accept it.

1791: The National (Constituent) Assembly drafted a new constitution that instituted an **elected Legislative Assembly**, which made the king chief executive officer, largely responsible to the Assembly; the latter established voting qualifications for male citizens.

JUNE 14, 1791: The **Le Chapelier Law** was passed banning guilds and the right to strike, which enraged the sans-culottes, the poorest people in the city.

JUNE 21, 1791: The **Flight to Varennes** of the royal family in order to raise a counter-revolutionary army, was stopped, and the king and queen became prisoners of the Parisian mob.

AUGUST 1791: **The Declaration of Pillnitz** by the king of Austria threatened military action to restore order in France and encouraged the radical revolutionaries who wanted to overthrow the monarchy in defiance of the declaration from foreign aristocrats.

Timeline: The Second or Radical Stage of the Revolution (1792-1795)

APRIL 20, 1792: The Legislative Assembly, the legislature under the new constitution, **declared war on Austria** in response to an ultimatum. The **international Wars of the French Revolution** began.

JULY 25, 1792: The commander of a Prussian army, about to invade France, issued the **Brunswick Manifesto**, threatening the people of Paris if harm came to the king. Jacobin (radical republican) leaders aroused the Paris mobs.

AUGUST 10, 1792: The **Tuileries were stormed**, and the king was taken prisoner; the mobs slaughtered over a thousand priests, bourgeois, and aristocrats who opposed the radicals' ambitions.

SEPTEMBER 21, 1792: **France was proclaimed a republic**, the first of five to come.

1793: An appeal to nationalism inspired the French people to drive back invaders, and the **First Coalition**, an alliance of Austria, Great Britain, Netherlands, Prussia, and Spain, was organized to combat any French advance. Revolutionary armies, raised by mass conscription, sought to bring the changes initiated in France to the rest of Europe.

The **Jacobins**, supported by the Paris mobs, and the **Girondists**, supported by the peasants in the rural areas, battled for control of the **National Convention**, which was the new assembly under the republic. .

Maximilien Robespierre (1758-1794), leader of the Jacobins, pushed for the execution of the king, and both Louis XVI and his queen, **Marie Antoinette** (1755-1793) were guillotined in January 1793.

SUMMER 1793: A dictatorial **Committee of Public Safety** launched the “Reign of Terror.” Over 20,000 people, (nearly 75 percent of them working class and peasants) were executed from the summer of 1793 to that of 1794.

LATE 1793: The **Republic of Virtue** was proclaimed by the Committee of Public Safety in an attempt to de-Christianize France; it largely alienated the Catholic majority of the nation.

1794: When public opinion turned against the excesses of the Reign of Terror, both **Danton** (1759-1794) an original Jacobin, and Robespierre, leader of the Republic of Virtue, were executed by the National Convention.

The Final or Reactionary Stage of the Revolution (1795-1799): The **Thermidorian Reaction**, which was the execution of Robespierre, took place during the month of Thermidor (August 18-September 16) on the new non-Christian calendar, and returned the moderate bourgeois reformers to power.

1795-1799: The Directory, a five-member executive, was established by the National Convention to run the government. When a Paris mob threatened the new government, **Napoleon Bonaparte** (r. 1799-1815), a young general who by chance was in Paris at the time, put down the riot and was rewarded with command of the French armies fighting the Austrians in Italy.

Reaction to the French Revolution

While many were inspired by the revolution’s emphasis on equality and human rights, others such as Edmund Burke condemned its violence and disregard for traditional authority.

- Burke’s ***Reflections on the Revolution in France***, 1793, set the stage for the emergence of conservatism as practiced by Klemens von Metternich after Napoleon’s reign.
- Mary Wollstonecraft and others in Great Britain and France rejected Burke’s thinking, as exemplified by Wollstonecraft’s ***Vindication of the Rights of Woman***, written in reaction to Burke.

Women's Role in the Revolution

Women also played a major role in the French Revolution. In October of 1789, the revolution was at a turning point. In the midst of a continuing shortage of bread, rumors of counterrevolution spread among the guards and royalty at Versailles. In response, many women (and some men dressed as women) gathered in Paris to march to the royal palace at Versailles to demand an accounting from the king. They marched 12 miles in the rain and were joined by thousands of men. The next day the crowd became rowdy and eventually broke into the royal apartments, killing two of the king's bodyguards. To prevent further bloodshed, Louis agreed to move his family back to Paris.

Women's participation was not confined to rioting and demonstrating. Women started to participate in meetings of political clubs, and a guarantee of women's rights became a topic of discussion during the revolution. In July of 1790, the Marquis de Condorcet published a newspaper article in support of full political rights for women, which increased the importance of the discussion. He argued that France's women should enjoy equal political rights with men. His ideas were supported by the publication of the *Declaration of the Rights of Woman* by Olympe de Gouges, and the subsequent defense, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* by Mary Wollstonecraft in 1791.

Cause and Effect Chart for the French Revolution

If you can understand and retain the information on this chart, then you are ready for any question that the AP exam will have about the French Revolution. **1. The Estates General meets for the first time**

Cause: The French nation had seen famine and economic collapse. The Estates General had not met in 175 years, but was convened in order to raise taxes after the Parliament of Paris refused to do so.

Effect: The meeting unified the nobility with the Third Estate and they took the Tennis Court Oath, promising not to leave until they had created a constitution for France.



2. Declaration of the Rights of Man

Cause: The monarchy had consolidated power through the *intendant* system; also, the failure of crops and the economy. These woes along with the ideas of the Enlightenment and the American Revolution, led to the demand for a French constitution at the Storming of the Bastille, which helped to create it.

Effect: The French Revolution began in earnest with the Great Fear, and the path was cleared for the creation of the National Assembly.



3. The Great Fear

Cause: The pent-up aggression of the Third Estate was unleashed as a reaction to the Declaration of the Rights of Man.

Effect: A chasm developed between the nobility and the peasantry, and factions formed in France about what the new government should look like and how it should act.



4. Formation of the National Assembly

Cause: The disintegration of order in France and the Declaration led to the formation of the National Assembly, or Constituent Assembly, in order to make a constitution and rule the country.

Effect: They created a constitution that allowed for election of a legislative assembly with the king at the helm. The king then tried to escape with his family.



5. Attempted escape of Louis XVI and family

Cause: The revolutionary mood in France made them fear more for their lives than for their titles and possessions.

Effect: This further cemented national sentiment against the royal family and was a factor in their later execution.



6. The Legislative Assembly declares war on Austria

Cause: The Declaration of Pillnitz saw Austria try to intervene in French affairs by pursuing military action to protect the monarchy.

Effect: The sans-culottes and the radicals came together with support building all over France against foreign invasion.



7. Radicals and sans-culottes gain power

Cause: The pendulum of change had been held to the right for so long that it swung far in the other direction. Pent-up aggression from the Third Estate led to the most demagogical leaders gaining power: Marat, Danton, and Robespierre.

Effect: Revolutionary zeal swept the common people of France. Society was turned upside down, and the Reign of Terror would eventually result.



8. The National Convention is formed

Cause: The new constitution, which created the First Republic, called for a National Assembly to be formed.

Effect: This body was very politically biased with the radical Jacobin Party in power. The modern-day terms, Right and Left for Conservative and Liberal, come from the seating arrangement in this body.



9. The Jacobin Club gains prominence

Cause: The radical mood of Paris and the overwhelming support of the poor and the peasants led the radical Jacobin Party to gain power. The powerful demagogues mentioned in box 7 and France's military needs also contributed.

Effect: The revolution goes through a second stage that is more radical and sometimes known as the Reign of Terror.



10. Execution of King Louis XVI

Cause: The radical turn of the revolution: the king's alliance with Austria, and his life of excess and poor national management led to his execution.

Effect: The other nations of Europe condemned France, and the revolution turns more radical as it becomes clear that no one who opposes the revolution is safe in France.



11. Committee of Public Safety oversees Reign of Terror

Cause: The radical mood of Paris, the rise of radicals, and the execution of the king combine to lead the Third Estate to kill over 20,000, most of whom were in the Third Estate. Anyone associated with nobility was in danger and many innocents were executed at the guillotine.

Effect: Many abroad opposed the revolution, and the terror soon convinced many French that the revolution had gone too far.



12. End of the Reign of Terror and Rise of the Directory

Cause: The leadership of the Committee turned on each other and, by 1794, Marat, Robespierre, and Danton were dead, the last two killed as enemies of the revolution. The radical phase ran its course and the people wanted stability.

Effect: France was ruled by moderates, and many of the sans-culottes felt abandoned by the revolution.



13. Napoleon rises to power

Cause: There was definitely a power vacuum, and the nation was looking for a strong leader to emerge, which Napoleon did in style. He was a brilliant general and a lesser noble who was not a part of the establishment, but who understood power very well.

Effect: Napoleon took over France and conquered most of Europe. He instituted reforms of the law and instituted freedom of religion across the Continent. He also unified Italy and Germany for the first time (in centuries for Italy). His legacy was a reorganization of European power at the Congress of Vienna after his defeat.

Napoleon

In 1799, after spectacular victories against the Austrians and later against British armies in Egypt, Napoleon overthrew the Directory in a *coup d'état* and formed a new government, the Consulate, made up of three consuls, with Napoleon as head consul.

Napoleon's Domestic Reforms

Even as emperor, Napoleon was committed to many of the ideals of the French Revolution. He was an outsider to Paris, raised on Corsica (which had only recently become French), without wealth or connections, which makes his meteoric rise even more noteworthy. Napoleon reached the heights he did because the Revolution opened society to men of ability. His reforms assured the dissolution of the Old Regime by establishing egalitarianism in government, before the law, and in educational opportunity .

- **The Concordat of 1801**, in which the papacy renounced claims over Church property seized during the revolution and Napoleon was allowed to nominate bishops.
 - In return, those priests who had resisted the Civil Constitutions of the clergy would replace those who had sworn an oath to the state.
 - Since the pope gave up claims to Church lands, those citizens who had acquired them pledged loyalty to Napoleon's government.
- With the **Code Napoleon**, 1804, Napoleon replaced varied. and inequitable medieval law with a uniform legal system.
 - Became a model for codes of law in many European countries.
- In 1808, instituted a **state-supported educational system** with rigorous standards and made available to the masses.
- He created a **merit system** to recruit and reward those in government, despite the fact that he practiced flagrant **nepotism** by placing his relatives on the thrones of nations he conquered.
- Lowered the taxes on farmers.
- Guaranteed that the redistributed Church lands remained in the hands of their new owners, who were mostly peasant farmers.
- Created an **independent peasantry** that would become the backbone of French democracy;

Napoleon's Conquests and Defeats

Napoleon's aim was to unite Europe under France's leadership. In a decade, he was able to conquer vastly more territory and to influence the destinies of more nations than the Sun King, Louis XIV, had in his sixty and more years' reign. His very success convinced the peoples he conquered or battled with that their future lay in national unity, and the force of nationalism eventually led to his downfall and shaped the destiny of Europe well into the twentieth century. Napoleon's **new military tactics** allowed him to exert direct or indirect control over much of the European continent, spreading the ideals of the French Revolution across Europe. These tactics included: the use of "light" artillery; forcing a pitched battle from the front and then sending a cavalry charge from behind; the use of professional ambulance corps and a professional supply system.

Italy: In 1797, his victories led to a northern Italian republic, the Cisalpine, and to several satellites in central and southern Italy under French control.

- By 1809, he controlled virtually all of Italy, abolishing feudalism and reforming the social, political, and economic structures.
- Practiced nepotism by placing family members on many European thrones.
- Revolutionary ideals inspired a slave revolt led by Toussaint l' Overture in the French colony of Saint Domingue, which became the independent nation of Haiti in 1804 despite Napoleon sending troops to put down the rebellion. This was his first defeat.
- He decided against *national* unity for the Italians, Who had been divided into competing city-states and kingdoms during the Middle Ages, because unity might pose a threat to French dominance of the region.

Germany: After soundly defeating the two most powerful and influential German states, Austria and Prussia, Napoleon reorganized Germany:

- Consolidated many of the nearly 300 independent political entities (among these consolidations was the **Confederation of the Rhine**).
- Abolished feudalism and carried out reforms.
- Awakened German nationalism.

The Continental System

The Continental System: Through a series of shifting alliances, the British had consistently opposed the upset of the European balance of power brought

about by French victories on the Continent, and Napoleon decided to engage in economic warfare rather than launch an actual invasion of the island.

- Unable to overcome British supremacy at sea and invade, Napoleon decided to starve Britain out by closing the ports of the Continent to British commerce.
- He coerced Russia, then a temporary ally of the French, his defeated enemy, Prussia, neutral Denmark and Portugal, and French satellite, Spain, all to adhere to the boycott.
- This policy was a complete failure and caused inflation and dissent in his empire, contributing to his downfall.

Spain: When Napoleon tried to tighten his control over Spain by replacing the Spanish king with one of his own brothers, the Spaniards waged a costly **guerrilla war** that was aided by the British under one of their ablest commanders, the **Duke of Wellington** (1769-1852).

Russia: Napoleon invaded Russia in June of 1812, when the Russians withdrew from the Continental System that was preventing Russia from trading with Great Britain and causing Russian economic hardship.

- Napoleon assembled more than 600,000 of his best soldiers and marched into Russia, only to be met by scorched earth tactics rather than pitched battle.
 - The Russians destroyed all materials that could be foraged for Napoleon's army and only attacked in skirmishes at strategically advantageous points.
- Napoleon's army took Moscow, but due to the city being burned, his stretched supply lines, and the oncoming winter, he retreated.
- He returned from Russia with only about 22,000 soldiers.
- This devastated Napoleon's army and diminished his image.

The Collapse of the Napoleonic Empire

Napoleon's empire was in disarray after his defeat in Russia. The other powers he had defeated saw his vulnerability and unified to attack him.

- Lost 500,000 of his 600,000-man Grand Army in Russia.
- Riots in Italy against his rule.
- British invasion of southern France by Wellington's army.
- Napoleon was defeated by the combined forces of Russia, Prussia, and

Austria in October 1813 at the **Battle of Leipzig**, also known as the **Battle of Nations**.

- Napoleon abdicated as emperor on April 4, 1814.
- The Bourbons were restored to the throne of France in the person of Louis XVIII (r. 1814-1824).
- -Napoleon was exiled to the island of Elba in the Mediterranean.
- France surrendered all territory gained since the international Wars of the French Revolution began in 1792.
- King Louis created a legislature that represented only the upper classes.
- The restoration, however, maintained most of Napoleon's reforms such as the Code Napoleon, the concordat with the Pope, and the abolition of feudalism.

The Congress of Vienna (September 1814-June 1815)

Representatives of the major powers of Europe, including France, met to redraw territorial lines and to restore, as far as was possible, the social and political order that existed before the Revolution and Napoleon. The *rule of legitimacy* was one primary goal: to return the “rightful” rulers of Europe to their thrones was one; a return to a balance of power that would guarantee peace was the other.

The august assemblage consisted of *Klemens von Metternich* (1773-1859), chancellor of Austria; Viscount *Castlereagh* (1769-1822), foreign minister of Great Britain; *Czar Alexander of Russia* (r. 1801-1825); *Prince Hardenberg* of Prussia; and *Charles Maurice de Talleyrand* (1754-1838), foreign minister of France.

Metternich, Castlereagh, and Talleyrand constituted the first “Big 3” in European history.

The Settlement

To prevent her future expansion, France was surrounded by a number of strong states:

1. A newly united Holland and Belgium, called the Kingdom of the Netherlands.
2. A Prussian satellite area on the Rhine.
3. Austrian buffer states in Northern Italy.
4. In Germany, Napoleon’s reorganization remained, and the 300 originally independent states were reduced to 39.
5. The Habsburg Holy Roman Empire was not reestablished.

The 100 Days

The Hundred Days began on March 1, 1815, when Napoleon managed to escape from his exile in Elba and made it to the south of France with a small honor guard of less than 100 men, marching, to popular acclaim, into Paris.

- He raised an army.
- Defeated a Prussian army in Belgium.
- Was defeated on June 18 at **Waterloo**, in Belgium, by the Duke of

Wellington and Prussian general Gebhard von Blücher.

- Imprisoned on the island of **St. Helena** in the South Atlantic, and died there on May 5, 1821.

The Concert of Europe was created in November 1815 by a coalition known as the **Quadruple Alliance**: Great Britain, Prussia, Russia, and Austria.

- √ Its aim was to maintain the status quo that the Congress of Vienna had established, upholding the territorial boundaries and shoring up the monarchies of Europe against the spread of revolutionary ideas, such as **republicanism** (that the people should elect their rulers).
- √ The **Holy Alliance** of Austria, Prussia, and Russia was formed to prevent the dual economic and political revolutions from occurring anywhere in Europe.
- √ In effect the members of this alliance pledged to send their armies to any area intent on destroying monarchies and the status quo. The Holy Alliance, the Concert of Europe, and the Quadruple Alliance, were effective in the short term at preventing republican and economic revolutions in Poland, Italy, and Spain, as well as contributing to the failure of the Decembrists in Russia.
- √ Belgium did gain independence in 1830.
- √ In 1848, all bets were off when most of Europe erupted into short-lived revolution, and Metternich fled to England.

Even though the Quadruple Alliance did not last for long, the balance of power created by the Congress of Vienna prevented a general war for a hundred years.

Criticism of Napoleon

Napoleon was criticized by his contemporaries and by historians for many of his practices. He curtailed the freedoms of his own people through police *ensorship*, *limitation of women's rights*, and his use of his *secret police* to spy on his own people. He also used nepotism to appoint family members to positions of rule, and ignited nationalism across the Continent in reaction to his conquests. He was egotistical to the point that he designed his own tomb so that those who wish to view him must bow to him.

