CHAPTER 1

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION I, 1789 – 1799

The shape of the modern world first became visible during ten years of upheaval in France between the years 1789 and 1799. Radical ideas about society and government were developed during the 18th century in response to the success of the "scientific" and "intellectual" revolutions of the preceding two centuries. Armed with new scientific knowledge of the physical universe as well as a new view of the human capacity to detect "truth," social critics assailed the existing modes of thought governing political, social, religious and economic life.

Thus the modern world that came of age in the 18th century was characterized by rapid, revolutionary changes which paved the way for economic modernization and political centralization throughout Europe. The ideas and institutions created by the revolutionaries would be perpetuated and extended by Napoleon Bonaparte, who conquered and converted Europe.

1.1 IMPACT OF THE SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTION (c. 1500 – 1700)

The Scientific Revolution revolutionized human thinking about the physical universe and themselves by producing a body of independent, scientific knowledge based on new measuring devices and new methods of observation and interpretation. This knowledge suggested that humans would understand the operation of the physical world through use of their reason, aided by the modern scientific method of inquiry.

The "scientific method" involved identifying a problem or question, forming a hypothesis (unproven theory), making observations, conducting experiments, interpreting results with mathematics and drawing conclusions.

1.1.1 *Pioneers*

Nicolaus Copernicus (1473 – 1543) rejected the geocentric (earth-centered) view of universe and suggested a heliocentric (sun-centered) view of the universe and thus began the tradition of modern scientific thinking.

Galileo Galilei (1564 – 1642) developed a powerful telescope and confirmed Copernicus' theories.

Tycho Brahe (1546 – 1601) is considered the greatest astronomer of the late 16th century. Having built one of the earliest modern observatories, he kept meticulous celestial observations.

Johannes Kepler (1571 – 1630) used Brahe's observations to prove that a mathematical order existed in the planetary system; he proved mathematically that the planets revolve around the sun.

Isaac Newton (1642 – 1727) discovered the laws of motion, gravity and inertia. By building on earlier discoveries he developed a systematic interpretation of the operation of the universe (Newtonian View of the Universe), wherein natural scientific laws all worked together to provide a clear and comprehensive explanation of the physical universe. After Newton, the scientific method was not a matter of theory or observation, but both. Little wonder then that the poet Alexander Pope could write: "Nature and nature's laws lay hid in the night; God said, Let Newton be! and all was light."

1.1.2 *Philosophical Trends*

Empiricism (inductive method of reasoning) was advanced by Sir Francis Bacon (1561 – 1626), who believed knowledge was gained through systematic observation of the world and tested by experiment.

Rationalism (deductive method of reasoning) was advanced by René Descartes (1596 – 1650), who rejected the senses as a basis for knowledge and argued that reality could be known only by reasoning from self-evident axiomatic principles: *"Cogito ergo sum"* ("I think, therefore I am").

1.1.3 *Consequences*

The Scientific Revolution gave birth to the modern scientific community, whose goal was the expansion of knowledge based on modern scientific method that rejected traditional knowledge.

It likewise convinced many persons that all the complexities of the universe (including human relations) could be reduced to relatively simple mechanical laws such as those found in the physical universe.

1.2 INFLUENCE OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT (c. 1700 – 1800)

The Scientific Revolution gravely undermined the foundation on which the traditional social order of the 18th century rested by producing a revolution in the world of ideas which would seriously challenge the status quo. The enlightenment was a response to economic and political changes at work in European society and heralded the coming of a new secular society.

1.2.1 *The Philosophes: Agents of Change*

The new learning was promoted by a relatively small number of thinkers called philosophes — not philosophers in a traditional sense but social activists for whom knowledge was something to be converted into reform. They were not always original thinkers but popularizers of leading reformist thought. The philosophes believed their task was to do for human society what the scientists had done for the physical universe: apply reason to society for the purpose of human improvement and in the process discover the natural laws governing God, humans and society.

While they came from virtually every country in Europe, most of the famous social activists were French, probably because France was the center of this intellectual revolution.

Voltaire (1694 – 1778), considered the most brilliant and influential of the philosophes, argued for tolerance, reason, limited government and free speech.

Denis Diderot (1713 – 1784) served as editor of the *Encyclopedia*, the bible of the enlightenment period. This twenty-eight volume work was a compendium of all new learning; no self-respecting reformer would be found without a set.

Baron de Montesquieu (1689 – 1756) authored *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748) in which the separation of powers theory was found. Montesquieu believed such a separation would keep any individual (including the king) or group (including the nobles) from gaining total control of the government.

Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712 – 1778) wrote *The Social Contract* (1762) in an attempt to discover the origin of society and propose the composition of the ideal society which, he believed, was based on a new kind of social contract.

The dissemination of enlightenment thought was largely accomplished through philosophes touring Europe or writing and printing books and essays, the publication of the *Encyclopedia* (1751), and the discussions in the salons of the upper classes. The salons became the social setting for the exchange of ideas, and were usually presided over by prominent women.

1.2.2 *Major Assumptions of the Enlightenment*

Human progress was possible by changing the environment, i.e., better people, better societies, better standard of living.

Humans were free to use reason to reform the evils of society.

Material improvement would lead to moral improvement.

Natural science and human reason will discover the meaning of life.

Laws governing human society would be discovered through application of the scientific method of inquiry.

Inhuman practices and institutions would be removed from society in a spirit of humanitarianism.

Human liberty would ensue as individuals became free to choose what reason dictated or required as good.

1.2.3 *Enlightenment Effect on Society*

Changes or reform must be instituted when institutions cannot demonstrate a rational base of operation.

Religion. Deism or "natural religion" was inaugurated, which rejected traditional Christianity by promoting an impersonal God who does not interfere in the daily lives of the people. The continued discussion of the role of God led to a general skepticism associated with Pierre Bayle (1647 – 1706), a type of religious skepticism pronounced by David Hume (1711 – 1776), and a theory of atheism or materialism advocated by Baron Holbach (1723 – 1789).

Political Theory. John Locke (1632 – 1704) and Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712 – 1778) believed that people were capable of governing themselves either through a political (Locke) or social (Rousseau) contract forming the basis of society. However, most philosophes opposed democracy, preferring a limited monarchy sharing power with the nobility.

Economic Theory. The assault on mercantilist economic theory was begun by the physiocrats in France, who proposed a "laissez-faire" (non-governmental interference) attitude toward land usage, and culminated in the theory of economic capitalism associated with Adam Smith (1723 – 1790) and his slogans of free trade, free enterprise and the law of supply and demand.

Educational Theory. Attempting to break away from the strict control of education by the church and state, Jean Jacques Rousseau advanced the idea of progressive education where children learn by doing and where self-expression is encouraged. This idea was carried forward by Johann Pestalozzi, Johann

Basedow and Friedrich Frobel and influenced a new view of childhood.

Psychological Theory. In the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) John Locke offered the theory that all human knowledge was the result of sensory experience without any preconceived notions, because the mind at birth was a blank slate (tabula rasa) that registered the experience of the senses passively. Education was critical in determining human development. Human progress is in the hands of society.

Gender Theory. The assertion of feminist rights evolved through the emergence of determined women who had been denied access to formal education, yet used their position in society to advance the cause of female emancipation. The enlightenment salons of Madame de Geoffren and Louise de Warens are an example of self-educated women taking their place alongside their male counterparts. One woman fortunate enough to receive education in science was Emilie du Chatelet, an aristocrat trained as a mathematician and physicist. Her scholarship resulted in the translation of Newton's work from Latin into French. The writing of Lady Mary Montagu and Mary Wollstonecraft promoted equal political and educational rights for women. Madame Marie Roland was a heroic figure throughout the early but critical periods of the French Revolution as she attacked the evils of the Ancien Regime.

1.2.4 *Era of "Enlightened Despotism"*

Most philosophes believed human progress and liberty would ensue as absolute rulers became "enlightened." The rulers would still be absolute but use their power benevolently as reason dictated. Their reforms were usually directed at increasing their power rather than the welfare of their subjects. Their creed was "Everything for the people, nothing by the people."

Most of the philosophes opposed democracy. According to Voltaire, the best form of government was a monarchy in which the rulers shared the ideas of the philosophes and respected the people's rights. Such an "enlightened" monarch would rule justly and introduce reforms. Voltaire's influence, as well as that of other philosophes, on Europe's monarchs produced the "enlightened despots" who nonetheless failed to bring about lasting political change. Some famous "despots" included Frederick "the Great" of Prussia (1740 – 1786), Catherine "the Great" of Russia (1762 – 1796), and Joseph II of Austria (1765 – 1790).

1.3 INFLUENCE OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

The American Revolution acted as a "shining beacon" to Europeans anxious for change, and helped prove that people could govern themselves without the help of monarchs and privileged classes.

France, the center of Enlightenment thought, was particularly vulnerable. Eighteenth-century ideas about the "Rights of Man" and the "Consent of the Governed" were discussed widely in French salons as well as in the rest of Europe. French reformers believed their nation was a perfect example of everything wrong with society. Philosophes and their admirers were galvanized into action.

Finally, the concept of revolution was validated as a legitimate means to procure social and political change when it could not be effected through existing avenues. However, the American Revolution was not a radical revolution but rather a conservative movement: It preserved the existing social order and property rights, and led to a carefully thought-out constitutional system built on stability and continuity.

1.4 CAUSES OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

1.4.1 *Cumulative Discontent with the Ancient Regime*

The rising expectations of "enlightened" society were demonstrated in the increased criticism directed toward government inefficiency and corruption or toward the privileged classes. The social stratification model failed to correspond to the realities of wealth and ability in French society: The clergy (First Estate) and nobility (Second Estate), representing only two percent of the total population of twenty-four million, were the privileged classes and were essentially tax exempt. The remainder of the population (Third Estate) consisted of the middle class, urban workers and the mass of peasants, and all bore the entire burden of taxation and the imposition of feudal obligations. As economic conditions worsened in the 18th century, the French state became poorer and totally dependent on the poorest and most depressed sections of the economy for support at the very time this tax base had become saturated.

The mode of absolute government practiced by the Bourbon dynasty was wed to the "Divine Right of Kings" philosophy. This in turn produced a government that was irresponsible and inefficient, with a tax system that was unjust and inequitable, and without any means of redress because of the absence of any meaningful representative assembly. The legal system was chaotic, with no uniform or codified laws.

The economic environment of the 18th century produced a major challenge to the state-controlled French economy (mercantilism), as businessmen and bankers assailed the restrictive features of this economic philosophy. With the growth of new industrial centers and the philosophic development of modern capitalist thought, the middle classes began to assert themselves, demanding that their economic power be made commensurate

with political and social power – both of which were denied them. Within France, the estate system allowed the few to monopolize all economic benefits, while the many were "invisible." Thus, an inequitable and inefficient tax system haunted those least able to pay, while the mass of peasants had an additional burden – that of performing feudal obligations for the privileged classes as well as the payment of outdated feudal taxes and fees.

The intellectual currents of the 18th century were responsible for creating a climate of opposition based on the political theories of John Locke, Jean Rousseau, Baron Montesquieu and other philosophes; the economic ideas of the French physiocrats and Adam Smith (the "Father of Modern Capitalism"); and the general reform-minded direction of the century.

1.4.2 *Immediate Cause: Financial Mismanagement*

The coming of revolution seemed a paradox in a nation that was one of the largest and richest nations in the world, with a population around twenty-four million and a capital city (Paris) which was considered the crossroads of Enlightenment civilization. Dissatisfaction with the way France was administered reached a critical stage during the reign of King Louis XVI (1774 – 1792).

The deepening public debt was of grave concern, and resulted from (1) the colonial wars with England, 1778 – 1783; (2) French participation in the American War of Independence; (3) maintaining large military and naval establishments; and (4) the extravagant costs of maintaining the Royal Court at Versailles. Unable to secure loans from leading banking houses in Europe (due to poor credit rating), France edged closer to bankruptcy.

Between 1730 and the 1780s, there was an inflationary spi-

ral which increased prices dramatically while wages failed to adjust accordingly. Government expenses continued to outstrip tax revenues. The "solution" to the debt problem was to either increase the rates of taxation or decree new taxes. The French tax system could not produce the amount of taxes needed to save the government from bankruptcy because of the corruption and inefficiency of the system. The legal system of "Parlements" (Courts), controlled by the nobility, blocked tax increases as well as new taxes in order to force the king to share power with the Second Estate.

As France slid into bankruptcy, Louis XVI summoned an Assembly of Notables (1787) in the mistaken hope they would either approve the king's new tax program or consent to the removal of their exemption from the payment of taxes. They refused to agree to either proposal.

1.4.3 *Estates General Summoned*

Designed to represent the three estates of France, this ancient feudal body had only met twice, once at its creation in 1302 and again in 1614. When the French parlements insisted that any new taxes must be approved by this body, King Louis XVI reluctantly ordered it to assemble at Versailles by May, 1789. Each estate was expected to elect their own representatives. As a gesture to the size of the Third Estate, the king doubled the number of their representatives. However, the Parlement of Paris decreed that voting in the Estates General would follow "custom and tradition," i.e., by estate unit voting. Therefore the First and Second estates, with similar interests to protect, would control the historic meeting despite the increased size of the Third Estate.

Election fever swept over France for the very first time. The 1788 – 89 election campaign is sometimes considered the precursor of modern politics. Each estate was expected to com-

pile a list of suggestions and complaints called "cahiers" and present them to the king. These lists of grievances emphasized the need for reform of government and civil equality. Campaigning focused on debate and the written word (pamphlets). The most influential writer was the Abbé Siéyès and his pamphlet, "What is the Third Estate?"; the answer was "everything."

The election campaign took place in the midst of the worst subsistence crisis in 18th century France, with widespread bad harvests, grain shortages and inflated bread prices.

Finally, on May 5, 1789 the Estates General met and was immediately convulsed over the voting method, i.e., voting by unit and not per capita. Each estate was ordered to meet and vote separately. The third estate refused and insisted on the entire assembly remaining together.

1.5 PHASES OF REVOLUTION

1.5.1 *The National Assembly, 1789 – 1791*

After a six-week deadlock over voting methods, the Third Estate declared itself the true National Assembly of France (June 17). They were immediately locked out of their meeting place by order of Louis XVI. Instead they assembled in an indoor tennis court where they swore an oath never to disband until they had given France a constitution (Tennis Court Oath). The third estate had assumed sovereign power on behalf of the nation. Defections from the First and Second Estates then caused the king to recognize the National Assembly (June 27) after dissolving the Estates General. At the same time, Louis XVI ordered troops to surround Versailles.

The "Parisian" revolution began at this point. Angry because of food shortages, unemployment, high prices, and fear-

ing military repression, the workers and tradesmen began to arm themselves. On July 14 they stormed the ancient fortress of the Bastille in search of weapons. The fall of this hated symbol of royal power gave the revolution its baptism of blood. The king recalled his troops from Versailles. The spirit of rebellion spread to the French countryside, triggered by a wave of rumor and hysteria. A feeling of fear and desperation called "The Great Fear" took hold of the people. They attacked the symbols of the upper class wealth, the manor houses, in an effort to destroy the legal records of their feudal obligations. The middle class responded to this lower class violence by forming the National Guard Militia to protect property rights. Hoping to put an end to further violence, the National Assembly voted to abolish feudalism in France and declare the equality of all classes (August 4). A virtual social revolution had taken place peacefully. The assembly then issued a constitutional blueprint, the "Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizens" (August 26), a guarantee of due process of law and the sovereignty of the people. The National Assembly now proceeded to its twin functions of governing France on a day-to-day basis and writing a constitution.

Among the achievements of the National Assembly were the following:

1) *Secularization of Religion* — Church property was confiscated to pay off the national debt. The Civil Constitution of the Clergy (1790) created a national church with 83 bishops and a like number of dioceses. All clergy were to be democratically elected by the people and have their salaries paid by the state. The practical result was to polarize the nation over the question of religion.

2) *Governmental Reform* — To make the country easier to administer, the Assembly divided the country into 83

departments (replacing the old provincial boundary lines) governed by elected officials. With a new system of law courts, France now had a uniform administrative structure, 83 dioceses, departments and judicial districts.

3) *Constitutional Changes* — Despite a failed attempt by Louis XVI and his family to escape from France (June 20, 1791) and thereby avoid approving the Constitution of 1791, the National Assembly completed what may have been its greatest task by transforming France into a constitutional monarchy with a unicameral Legislative Assembly. Middle class control of the government was assured through an indirect method of voting and property qualifications.

1.5.2 *The Legislative Assembly, 1791 - 1792*

While the National Assembly had been rather homogeneous in its composition, the new government began to reflect the emergence of political factions in the revolution who were competing for power. The most important political clubs were republican groups such as the Jacobins (radical urban) and Girondins (moderate rural), while the Sans-culottes (working-class extreme radical) were a separate faction with an economic agenda.

The focus of political activity during the ten-month life of the Legislative Assembly was the question of "war." Influenced by French nobles who had fled France beginning in 1789 (Émigrés), the two largest continental powers, Prussia and Austria, issued the Declaration of Pillnitz (August, 1791) declaring the restoration of French monarchy as their goal. With a sharply polarized nation, mounting political and economic chaos, and an unpopular monarch, republican sentiment gained strength as war against all monarchs was promoted to solve domestic problems. Ideological fervor and anti-Austrian sentiment drove the

Legislative Assembly to declare war on Austria (April, 1792). Unprepared, the French revolutionary forces proved no match for the Austrian military. The Jacobins blamed their defeat on Louis XVI, believing him to be part of a conspiracy with Prussia and Austria. Mobs reacted to the threat made by the invading armies to destroy Paris (Brunswick Manifesto) if any harm came to the royal family by seizing power in Paris and imprisoning the king. The Legislative Assembly came under attack and obliged the radicals by suspending the 1791 Constitution, ordering new elections based on universal male suffrage for the purpose of summoning a national convention to give France a republican form of government.

1.5.3 *The National Convention, 1792 – 1795*

Meeting for the first time in September, 1792, the Convention abolished monarchy and installed republicanism. Louis XVI was charged with treason, found guilty and executed on January 21, 1793. Later the same year, the queen, Marie Antoinette would meet the same fate.

By the spring of 1793 the new republic was in a state of crisis. England and Spain had joined Austria and Prussia in opposing the revolution. Food shortages and counterrevolution in western France threatened the radicals' grip on the revolution. A power struggle ensued between Girondins and Jacobins until the Jacobins ousted their political enemy and installed an emergency government to deal with the external and internal challenges to the revolution. A Committee of Public Safety, directed by Maximilien Robespierre, responded to the food shortages and related economic problems by decreeing a planned economy (Law of the Maximum) which would also enable France to urge total war against its external enemies. Lazare Carnot, known as "The Organizer of Victory," was placed in charge of reorganizing the French army. The entire nation was

conscripted into service (Levée en masse) as war was defined as a national mission.

The most notorious event of the French Revolution was the famous "Reign of Terror" (1793 – 1794), the government's campaign against its internal enemies and counterrevolutionaries. Revolutionary Tribunals were created to hear the cases of accused enemies brought to "justice" under a new Law of Suspects. Approximately 25,000 people throughout France lost their lives. Execution by guillotine became a spectator sport. A new political culture began to emerge, called the "Republic of Virtue." This was Robespierre's grand scheme to de-Christianize France and inculcate revolutionary virtue. The terror spiraled out of control, consuming leading Jacobin leaders (Danton, DesMoulins, and Hébert) until no one could feel secure in the shadow of Robespierre's dictatorship. On July 27, 1794 Robespierre was denounced in the Convention, arrested and executed the next day along with his close associate St. Just.

The fall of Robespierre was followed by a dramatic swing to the right called the Thermidorian Reaction (1794). Tired of terror and virtue alike, the moderate bourgeoisie politicians regained control of the National Convention. The Girondins were readmitted. A retreat from the excesses of revolution was begun. A new constitution was written in 1795, which set up a republican form of government. A new Legislative Assembly would choose a five-member executive, the Directory, from which the new regime was to take its name. Before its rule came to an end, the Convention removed all economic controls, which dealt a death blow to the Sans-culottes. Finally the Convention decreed that at least for the first two years of operation the new government reserve two-thirds of the seats in the Legislative Assembly for themselves.

1.5.4 *The Directory, 1795 – 1799*

The Constitution of 1795 set the tone and style of government in France: voting and holding office was reserved to property owners. The middle class was in control. They wanted peace in order to gain more wealth and to establish a society in which money and property would become the only requirements for prestige and power. These goals confronted opposition groups such as the aristocracy, who in October, 1795 attempted a royalist uprising. It might have succeeded were it not for the young Napoleon Bonaparte, who happened to be in Paris at the time and loyally helped the government put down the rebellion. The Sans-culottes repeatedly attacked the government and its economic philosophy, but leaderless and powerless they were doomed to failure. Despite growing inflation and mass public dissatisfaction, the Directory government ignored a growing shift in public opinion. When elections in April, 1797 produced a triumph for the royalist right the results were annulled and the Directory shed its last pretense of legitimacy.

Military success overshadowed the weak and corrupt Directory government. French armies annexed the Austrian Netherlands, the left bank of the Rhine, Nice and Savoy. The Dutch republic was made a satellite state of France. The greatest military victories were won by Napoleon Bonaparte, who drove the Austrians out of northern Italy and forced them to sign the Treaty of Campo Formio (October, 1797) in return for which the Directory government agreed to Bonaparte's scheme to conquer Egypt and threaten English interests in the East.

The Directory government managed to hang on for two more years, thanks to the military successes. But a steady loss of support continued in the face of a government that was bankrupt, filled with corruption and unwilling to halt an inflationary spiral that was aggravating the already impoverished masses of French peasants. The spirit of revolution was being

crushed in the land, and this fear gave rise to a conspiracy to save the Revolution and forestall a royalist return to power. Led by the famous revolutionary, the Abbé Siéyès, Napoleon Bonaparte was invited to join the conspirators, which he did upon returning from Egypt. On November 9, 1799, they ousted the Directory. The conspirators quickly promulgated a new constitution which established the Consulate Era.

1.6 EVALUATION

1.6.1 *European Reaction to the Events of 1789 – 1799*

Liberals and radicals hailed the birth of liberty and freedom. Among those who explicitly defended the French Revolution were the German philosophers Immanuel Kant and Johann Fichte, the English scientist Joseph Priestly, and the American pamphleteer Tom Paine. Not all reaction was favorable. Conservatives predicted societal anarchy would ensue everywhere if the French revolutionaries succeeded. Friedrich Von Gentz and Edmund Burke, whose 1790 "Reflections on the Revolution in France" remains to this day as the classic statement of the conservative view of history. It was the romantic poet William Wordsworth who captured the sense of liberation and limitless hope inspired by the French Revolution:

> *"Bliss it was in that dawn to be alive*
> *But to be young was very heaven."*

1.6.2 *Results*

The first ten years of revolution in France destroyed the old social system and replaced it with a new one based on equality, ability and the law; guaranteed the triumph of capitalist society; gave birth to the notion of secular democracy; laid the foundations for the establishment of the modern nation-state; and gave the great mass of the human race what it had never had before except from religion: hope.

island of St. Helena where he died in 1821.

2.5 EVALUATION

The significance of the Napoleonic era lies in the fact that it produced the first egalitarian dictatorship of modern times.

Although Napoleon ruled France for only fifteen years, his impact had lasting consequences on French and world history:

1) He consolidated revolutionary institutions.

2) He thoroughly centralized the French government.

3) He made a lasting settlement with the Church.

4) He spread the positive achievements of the French Revolution to the rest of the world.

Napoleon also repressed liberty, subverted republicanism, oppressed conquered peoples and caused terrible suffering.

The Napoleonic Legend, based on the personal memoirs of Napoleon, suggest an attempt by Napoleon to rewrite history by interpreting past events in a positive light.

EXTENT OF NAPOLEONIC POWER, 1812