

Chapter 14: The French Revolution

When King Louis XIV died in 1715, he left France with a heavy burden of debt incurred during his wars of aggression. Although France was a prosperous country, the French monarchy was approaching bankruptcy, both in its finances and in its ability to provide the nation with effective leadership. Louis XIV's successors, Louis XV and Louis XVI, proved incapable of dealing with the government's financial and administrative problems.

The explosion came with the outbreak of revolution in 1789. During the next two years, the National Assembly, dominated by the reform-minded middle class, established a constitutional monarchy and reduced the power and privileges of the nobility and the Roman Catholic Church.

Under the Legislative Assembly (1791-1792) and the National Convention (1792-1795), the revolution entered a more radical phase. The monarchy was abolished, the king was executed, and the revolution passed through the Reign of Terror (1793-1794). The Thermidorean Reaction of 1794 established a new government, the Directory, which failed to cope effectively with France's political and economic problems. This failure resulted in the establishment of Napoleon Bonaparte's military dictatorship in 1799.

The Old Regime: King Louis XV (r. 1715-1774)

In 1715, Louis XV, the great-grandson of Louis XIV, became king. In 1726, Cardinal André Hercule de Fleury (1653-1743), became chief minister. Fleury proved relatively successful in stabilizing the French currency and maintaining peace in Europe, although he did little to confront some of the more fundamental problems facing the French monarchy.

Following Fleury's death in 1743, Louis XV acted as his own chief minister, although he was lazy, possessed few skills, and remained generally unaware of his government's problems.

Financial and Administrative Problems

The financial problems of the French state persisted and became more serious in the aftermath of the Seven Years' War, which ended in 1763. To compound the government's problems, the royal administration was in near chaos. Various agencies had ill-defined and overlapping functions, which served to delay action on important issues. No strong figure emerged to provide a sense of order and direction.

Demands of the Nobility

The nobility agitated for a restoration of its traditional political rights, which had been lost as the kings moved to

establish an absolute monarchy. The nobles wanted to create a system where they would share power with the king.

The Old Regime: King Louis XVI (r. 1774-1792)

In 1774, Louis XVI, the grandson of Louis XV, became king. His queen was Marie Antoinette (1755-1793), the daughter of Maria Theresa of Austria.

Jacques Turgot (1727-1781)

Louis XVI attempted to promote much-needed financial and economic reforms. In 1774, he named the physiocrat Turgot to the post of controller general of finances. Turgot sought to cut government expenditures and to abolish the trade guilds, which restricted the growth of the French economy. To relieve the peasants, he proposed ending the *corvée*, the requirement that the peasants perform labor on the roads. His efforts to reduce spending aroused considerable opposition, since a great many people benefited from government spending. Turgot's critics, especially the nobility, became increasingly outspoken in their attacks on his policies. In 1776, Louis XVI dismissed him only twenty months after his appointment to office. Turgot's dismissal served as a powerful symbol of the inability of the French monarchy to deal with its problems.

Jacques Necker (1732-1804)

Necker, a Swiss banker who had lived in Paris for many years, succeeded Turgot. Instead of attempting to institute reforms to resolve the financial crisis, Necker resumed the traditional policy of borrowing money and increasing spending. Louis XVI dismissed Necker in 1781. The fiscal crisis intensified, and the increasingly more desperate king recalled Necker in 1788.

The Estates General

In July 1788, in an attempt to win popular support for new taxes, Louis XVI decided to summon into session the Estates General, a consultative assembly that had last met in 1614. The Estates General represented the three legally defined classes (estates).

The First Estate – The Clergy

The First Estate consisted of all of the clergy but was dominated by the higher clergy, the archbishops, bishops, and abbots who were drawn from the ranks of the nobility. The higher clergy enjoyed sizable incomes, while the ordinary parish priests were not much better off than the people they served.

The Second Estate – The Nobility

The nobility, numbering about 400,000 persons, comprised the Second Estate and held a virtual monopoly on the highest and best-paid positions in the state and church. The nobility owned about one-fifth of the land and like the clergy, was exempt from direct taxes.

The Third Estate – The Peasants, the Middle Class, and the Urban Workers

The Third Estate consisted of all who were not classified as clergy or nobility, primarily the peasants, the middle class (the bourgeoisie), and the urban workers (the proletariat), who totaled about 98 percent of the French population of 25 million.

Peasants

With few exceptions, the peasants were free of serfdom, and many owned the land they farmed. Others were tenants. However, the peasants were exploited by both the government and the nobility. They had to pay high taxes, including a salt tax (the *gabelle*). There were vestiges of the manorial system, which required the peasants to pay rent to noblemen who had once controlled the land and to perform the *corvée* and other services for them. The peasants were not particularly concerned with political rights but wanted relief from high taxes and an end to their manorial obligations.

The Middle Class

The middle-class townspeople were better off than the peasants, but they were even more discontented. The middle class desired an abolition of the economic restrictions imposed by mercantilist regulation, a fairer distribution to the tax burden, and a greater voice in public affairs.

Urban Workers

In the late eighteenth century, the urban working class was relatively small. In Paris, however, the workers were numerous enough to play an active and influential role during the revolution.

Elections for the Estates General

In calling for the election of the Estates General, the king declared that it should consist of 300 representatives of the clergy, 300 representatives of the nobility, and 600 representatives of the Third Estate. The elections for the Estates General took place in an atmosphere of widespread discontent, which was intensified by the bad harvest of 1788. During the period of the elections, hundreds of pamphlets were published expressing the discontents and aspirations of various elements in the population. The electoral meetings not only elected representatives to the Estates General but also prepared written documents (cahiers) expressing the electors' grievances and proposals

for reform. These pamphlets and cahiers provide an excellent picture of the attitudes of the French people on the eve of the revolution.

Demands on the Monarchy

At one end of the social scale, the nobility gave renewed expression to its demands for the establishment of a constitutional monarchy in which the aristocrats would exercise a substantial degree of control. The Third Estate called for an end to the special privileges enjoyed by the clergy and nobility. The peasants demanded the abolition of the *gabelle*, as well as of the *corvée* and other remnants of manorialism. The middle class called for an end to mercantilist restrictions on industry and trade, reform of the often corrupt courts of law, and the establishment of a constitutional monarchy with an elected parliament and guarantees of civil liberties.

Voting by Order

When the Estates General held its first meeting at Versailles on May 5, 1789, Louis XVI ordered the estates to meet separately and to vote by order (by estates). The conservative First and Second Estates would thus outvote the representatives of the Third Estate, even though the clergy and nobility accounted for no more than 2 percent of the population.

The National Assembly (1789-1791)

On June 17, the increasingly rebellious Third Estate proclaimed itself to be the National Assembly and invited the members of the other two estates to join it.

The Tennis Court Oath

On June 20, having been locked out of its usual meeting place, the National Assembly met in an indoor tennis court. In what came to be known as the Tennis Court Oath, the National Assembly pledged that it would not disband until it had given France a constitution. A number of aristocrats and a large part of the First Estate, especially parish priests, joined the National Assembly.

Louis XVI Versus the National Assembly

The king continued to insist that the estates meet separately and ordered the National Assembly to disband. Under the leadership of the Comte de Mirabeau (1749-1791), the National Assembly defied the king. On June 27, Louis XVI gave way and ordered the first two estates to meet with the National Assembly. During this first period of the French Revolution, the period of the National Assembly, control was in the hands of moderates drawn from the middle class and the liberal nobility. Louis XVI hoped to reassert his authority and began to mass Swiss and German mercenaries in the area of Paris and Versailles. Rumors spread that the king planned to use

these mercenaries to disperse the National Assembly. On July 11, the king abruptly dismissed Necker. The rumors intensified and rioting broke out in Paris.

Storming of the Bastille

On July 14, a Paris mob stormed the Bastille, a fortress prison that stood as a hated symbol of the arbitrary rule of the Bourbons. In the aftermath of the taking of the Bastille, Necker was restored to power, Jean Bailly (1736-1793) became mayor of Paris, and the Marquis de Lafayette (1757-1834), a hero of the American Revolution, became commander of the newly created National Guard. The red, white, and blue tricolor flag of the revolution was adopted. As the revolution intensified, many aristocrats fled France.

The Great Fear

During the summer of 1789, the Great Fear swept the provinces. Rumors reported an impending famine and told of bandits, in the pay of the king or the nobility, roaming the countryside attacking peasants. Revolutionary fervor spread among the peasants. In an effort to halt the disorder in the countryside, the National Assembly, on August 4, ended the remnants of manorialism, including the *corvée*, and the privileges of the nobility. All French citizens now became equal in the eyes of the law.

Declaration of the Rights of Man

On August 27, 1789, the National Assembly approved the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, which embodied many of the ideas that had been expressed by the Enlightenment. Representing in particular the aspirations of the middle class, the declaration proclaimed that all men were “born and remain free and equal in rights.” These natural rights included the rights to “liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression.” More specifically, the declaration provided for freedom of speech and of the press, freedom of assembly and the right to petition the government, freedom of religion, and freedom from arbitrary arrest and imprisonment. The declaration also embraced the doctrine of popular sovereignty, providing that the “source of all sovereignty is essentially in the nation.”

Mob Action

In the autumn of 1789, a new wave of rumors asserted that the king was planning to use military force in an effort to restore his authority. On the night of October 5-6, a Paris mob, composed largely of women who were angry about increases in the price of bread, marched out to Versailles. Confronted by the mob, the king and the royal family agreed to return to Paris and to take up residence in the Tuileries Palace in the heart of the city.

The Political Clubs

During the first months of the revolution, a number of political clubs emerged. These clubs consisted mostly of middle-class business and professional men who met to discuss the issues of the day. In time, the clubs came to exert a major influence on the course of the revolution.

The Jacobins

The Jacobin Club was the most famous. At first, the Jacobins were relatively moderate in their views, but they gradually became more radical, demanding the abolition of the monarchy and the establishment of a republic. Maximilien Robespierre (1758-1794) became one of the Jacobins' best-known leaders.

The Cordeliers

The Cordeliers were radicals who, like the Jacobins, favored the abolition of the monarchy and the creation of a republic. Leading Cordeliers included Georges-Jacques Danton (1759-1794), a lawyer; Camille Desmoulins (1760-1794), a journalist; and Jean-Paul Marat (1743-1793), a physician and journalist.

The Feuillants

The Feuillant Club was a more conservative organization that favored a limited monarchy, rather than a republic. Following the abolition of the monarchy, the Jacobins suppressed the Feuillants.

The Civil Constitution of the Clergy

In November 1789, in an attempt to deal with the financial crisis faced by the French state, the National Assembly confiscated the land owned by the Roman Catholic Church. The National Assembly then issued paper money, known as *assignats*, using the confiscated land as security. The *assignats* declined rapidly in value, however, and the government's financial problems persisted. Deprived of its land, the church had lost its major source of income, and the French government now assumed the obligation of paying the salaries of the clergy. The National Assembly proceeded to reorganize the administration of the church, adopting the Civil Constitution of the Clergy on July 12, 1790. Bishops and priests would now be elected by the people, and the clergy were required to swear an oath of allegiance to support the new arrangement. Over half of the clergy refused to do so. These nonjurors, as they were called from the French word *jurer* (“to swear”), became bitter opponents of the revolution, as did many faithful Catholic laypeople.

The Constitution of 1791

In a troubled situation, the National Assembly continued its efforts to draft a constitution for France. In December 1790, Necker resigned after he lost favor with the National Assembly. Mirabeau now became the king's chief adviser, hoping to contribute to the establishment of a stable constitutional monarchy. Mirabeau's death on April 2,

1791, weakened the king's cause, as well as the cause of moderation.

On the night of June 20, 1791, the king and his immediate family fled from Paris, intending to leave France and secure foreign assistance against the revolutionaries. Captured in Varennes in northeastern France, the king and his family were compelled to return to the capital. On September 14, 1791, Louis XVI accepted the new constitution. This Constitution of 1791 established a limited monarchy with separation of powers between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. The king and his ministers constituted the executive, but their authority was limited by a one-house parliament, the Legislative Assembly.

Other Reforms of the National Assembly

The National Assembly abolished titles of nobility and also abolished the *parlements* and other courts of law that the nobility had dominated. A new system of courts was created, with elected judges and prosecutors. The use of torture was ended, and juries were introduced in the trial of criminal cases.

The National Assembly also reorganized local government. The old provinces were abolished, and France was divided for administrative purposes into eighty-three departments. In the realm of economic policy, the National Assembly followed laissez-faire principles, abolishing the guilds and ending mercantilist restrictions on industry and trade. The old system of direct and indirect taxes was ended, and a tax on land was introduced, along with a tax on the profits of industry and trade. The practice of farming out taxes to private collectors was ended.

The Legislative Assembly (1791-1792)

The newly elected Legislative Assembly held its first meeting on October 1, 1791, and remained in session for less than a year. The conservatives and moderates, who wanted to preserve the constitutional settlement of 1791, were weak and became weaker, while the influence of the radicals, who wanted to push the revolution further, increased. The radicals were divided into two main groups: the Girondists, whose leaders came from the area of Bordeaux in the department of the Gironde, and the Mountain, whose name came from the fact that its members occupied the highest seats on the left side of the meeting hall. The Mountain drew its main support from the Jacobin and Cordelier clubs.

Intervention of Foreign Powers

The Legislative Assembly faced a threat from foreign powers. In the Declaration of Pillnitz of August 27, 1791, Prussia and Austria declared their readiness to intervene if necessary to protect the French royal family and safeguard

the monarchy. In February 1792, Prussia and Austria concluded an alliance.

The Legislative Assembly responded by declaring war on Austria on April 20, 1792. The War of the First Coalition quickly got under way, as Prussia entered the war on Austria's side. Within a year, France was at war with most of Europe.

Radical Takeover

As the revolution moved in a more radical direction, the revolutionaries' watchword became "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity." On August 10, a Paris mob stormed the Tuileries Palace, massacring the king's Swiss Guards. The king fled to the Legislative Assembly, which took him prisoner. Voting to depose the king, the Legislative Assembly called for elections for a National Convention that would draft a constitution for a French republic.

The National Convention (1792-1795)

The National Convention held its first meeting on September 21, 1792. Proclaiming France a republic, the National Convention ruled the country for the next three years.

Radicals, once again known as the Mountain, dominated the National Convention under the leadership of Robespierre, Danton, Marat, and the Duke of Orleans (1747-1793), known as Philippe Egalité because of his support of democracy. The radicals had the support of the municipal government of Paris and the Paris mob, known as the *sans-culottes*. (The term means "without breeches," reflecting the fact that the workers wore long trousers rather than the knee breeches of aristocrats.)

Execution of Louis XVI

In December 1792, the National Convention found Louis XVI guilty of conspiracy against the liberty of the people and the security of the state. In January 1793, by a margin of one vote, the National Convention decided to execute the king. Louis XVI was beheaded on January 21, 1793. The National Convention approved the draft of a constitution establishing a democratic republic, but then suspended it for the duration of the war. The constitution never went into effect.

Reforms Enacted by the National Convention

The National Convention also enacted a series of reforms. Slavery was abolished in the French colonies. Primogeniture, the practice under which property was inherited by the eldest son, was abolished. The metric system of weights and measures was established. Imprisonment for debt was abolished. The estates of the emigré nobility (the nobles who had left France) were

confiscated, and the land was sold to peasants in small parcels of two or three acres. As a result, almost all the peasants of France became landowners.

Adopting a new calendar, the National Convention declared September 22, 1792, the first day of the year one of the French republic. A year of twelve months whose names were associated with the seasons and climate was established, and the week was extended to ten numbered days in order to eliminate Sunday.

Foreign and Domestic Threats

Prussia and Austria continued the war against France, and by early 1793 Great Britain, Holland, Spain, Portugal, Naples, and Sardinia had entered the conflict. Resuming the offensive, the Prussians drove the French out of the Austrian Netherlands (Belgium). As the crisis mounted in the spring of 1793, the National Convention ordered the conscription of 300,000 men.

Opposition to the National Convention mounted in a number of cities, as well as in rural areas. In March 1793, a major revolt broke out in the region of the Vendée, southwest of Paris. The National Convention now had to deal with the threat of a counterrevolution, as well as a foreign war.

The Reign of Terror

In an effort to combat the crisis, in April 1793, the National Convention established the Committee of Public Safety, which exercised dictatorial authority. Reorganized in July, its leading members included Danton, Robespierre, Marat, and Lazare Carnot (1753-1823), who specialized in military affairs.

When Danton urged a policy of moderation, he was removed from the Committee of Public Safety. The more radical Jacobins, led by Robespierre, established their full control over the government, and from the summer of 1793 to the summer of 1794, the Committee of Public Safety carried out an intensifying Reign of Terror. A revolutionary idealist, Robespierre hoped to create a republic of virtue where all citizens would possess high moral standards and be dedicated patriots. The most extreme violence was justified in order to achieve this noble end. A revolutionary tribunal was created to try those suspected of counterrevolution. The Reign of Terror ultimately claimed some 16,000 victims, including the former queen Marie Antoinette, Danton, Bailly, Desmoulins, and Philippe Egalité.

French Military Victories

As the war continued, Lazare Carnot ordered a *levée en masse*, the conscription of able-bodied men into the armies of the revolution, in August 1793. During 1793-1794, the French armies succeeded in defending the country against invasion. Then, during 1794-1795, they occupied the Low

Countries, the Rhineland, parts of Spain, Switzerland, and Savoy. The treaties of Basel, signed in March and June 1795, ended the war against Russia and Spain, respectively, although France remained at war with the Austrians and the British. In 1796, the French invaded Italy, occupying important areas of the country and forcing the Austrians out of the war. By 1797, the War of the First Coalition had ended, and only Great Britain remained at war against France.

The Thermidorean Reaction and the Constitution of 1795

During early 1794, opposition mounted to Robespierre and his efforts to create a republic of virtue. On 9 Thermidor (July 27, 1794), a group of conspirators arrested Robespierre; he was beheaded the following day. A number of others who were responsible for the Reign of Terror were also executed. Power passed to the wealthy middle class, which took control of the National Convention and the Committee of Public Safety. The National Convention prepared a new constitution, the Constitution of the Year III (the Constitution of 1795). The constitution created a two-house parliament consisting of the Council of Elders of 250 members and the Council of 500. Executive authority was exercised by five Directors who were elected by the Council of Elders. After completing the drafting of this new constitution, the National Convention was dissolved on October 26, 1795, and the Directory came into being.

The Directory (1795-1799)

The new government of the Directory experienced great difficulty in dealing with France's severe financial crisis and other problems. Inflation was out of control, and there were serious food shortages. Corruption was rampant, and an atmosphere of exhaustion engulfed the country after years of turmoil.

As discontent mounted, the Directory came increasingly to rely on the army for support. Finally on 18 Brumaire (November 9, 1799), the popular general Napoleon Bonaparte overthrew the Directory and established a military dictatorship.

Napoleon's seizure of power marked the end of the revolutionary decade that had begun in 1789. The leaders of the French Revolution had failed to establish an orderly and workable system of government. Nevertheless, they had enacted some enduring reforms. The worst abuses of the Old Regime had been eliminated, including royal absolutism, the privileges of the nobility and the higher clergy, and the remnants of manorialism. The principles of freedom of religion and the equality of all citizens before the law had been introduced, and a number of other reforms had been established.