

French Revolution

Encyclopædia Britannica Article

Introduction

also called Revolution of 1789 the revolutionary movement that shook France between 1787 and 1799 and reached its first climax there in 1789. Hence the conventional term "Revolution of 1789," denoting the end of the ancien régime in France and serving also to distinguish that event from the later French revolutions of 1830 and 1848.

Although historians disagree on the causes of the Revolution, the following reasons are commonly adduced: (1) the increasingly prosperous elite of wealthy commoners—merchants, manufacturers, and professionals, often called the bourgeoisie—produced by the 18th century's economic growth resented its exclusion from political power and positions of honour; (2) the peasants were acutely aware of their situation and were less and less willing to support the anachronistic and burdensome feudal system; (3) the philosophes, who advocated social and political reform, had been read more widely in France than anywhere else; (4) French participation in the American Revolution had driven the government to the brink of bankruptcy; and (5) crop failures in much of the country in 1788, coming on top of a long period of economic difficulties, made the population particularly restless.

Aristocratic revolt, 1787-89

The Revolution took shape in France when the controller general of finances, Charles-Alexandre de Calonne, arranged the summoning of an assembly of "notables" (prelates, great noblemen, and a few representatives of the bourgeoisie) in February 1787 to propose reforms designed to eliminate the budget deficit by increasing the taxation of the privileged classes. The assembly refused to take responsibility for the reforms and suggested the calling of the Estates-General, which represented the clergy, the nobility, and the Third Estate (the commoners) and which had not met since 1614. The efforts made by Calonne's successors to enforce fiscal reforms in spite of resistance by the privileged classes led to the so-called revolt of the "aristocratic bourgeoisie,"^{Print articles}ly that of the *parlements* (the most important courts of justice), whose powers were curtailed by the edict of May 1788. During the spring and summer of 1788, there was unrest among the populace in Paris, Grenoble, Dijon, Toulouse, Pau, and Rennes. The king, Louis XVI, had to yield; reappointing reform-minded Jacques Necker as the finance minister, he promised to convene the Estates-General on May 5, 1789. He also, in practice, granted freedom of the press, and France was flooded with pamphlets addressing the reconstruction of the state. The elections to the Estates-General, held between January and April 1789, coincided with further disturbances, as the harvest of 1788 had been a bad one. There were practically no exclusions from the voting; and the electors drew up *cahiers de doléances*, which listed their grievances and hopes. They elected 600 deputies for the Third Estate, 300 for the nobility, and 300 for the clergy.

Events of 1789

The Estates-General met at Versailles on May 5, 1789. They were immediately divided over a fundamental issue: should they vote by head, giving the advantage to the Third Estate, or by estate, in which case the two privileged orders of the realm might outvote the third? On June 17 the bitter struggle over this legal issue finally drove the deputies of the Third Estate to declare themselves the National Assembly; they threatened to proceed, if necessary, without the other two orders. They were supported by many of the parish priests, who outnumbered the aristocratic upper clergy among the church's deputies. When royal

officials locked the deputies out of their regular meeting hall on June 20, they occupied the king's indoor tennis court (*jeu de paume*) and swore an oath not to disperse until they had given France a new constitution. The king grudgingly gave in and urged the nobles and the remaining clergy to join the assembly, which took the official title of National Constituent Assembly on July 9; at the same time, however, he began gathering troops to dissolve it.

These two months of prevarication at a time when the problem of maintaining food supplies had reached its climax infuriated the towns and the provinces. Rumours of an "aristocratic conspiracy" by the king and the privileged to overthrow the Third Estate led to the Great Fear of July 1789, when the peasants were nearly panic-stricken. The gathering of troops around Paris and the dismissal of Necker provoked insurrection in the capital. On July 14, 1789, the Parisian crowd seized the Bastille, a symbol of royal tyranny. Again the king had to yield; visiting Paris, he showed his recognition of the sovereignty of the people by wearing the tricolour cockade.

In the provinces, the Great Fear of July led the peasants to rise against their lords. The nobles and the bourgeois now took fright. The National Constituent Assembly could see only one way to check the peasants; on the night of August 4, 1789, it decreed the abolition of the feudal regime and of the tithe. Then on August 26 it introduced the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, proclaiming liberty, equality, the inviolability of property, and the right to resist oppression.

The decrees of August 4 and the Declaration were such innovations that the king refused to sanction them. The Parisians rose again and on October 5 marched to Versailles. The next day they brought the royal family back to Paris. The National Constituent Assembly followed the court, and in Paris it continued to work on the new constitution.

The French population participated actively in the new political culture created by the Revolution. Dozens of uncensored newspapers kept citizens abreast of events, and political clubs allowed them to voice their opinions. Public ceremonies such as the planting of "trees of liberty" in small villages and the Festival of Federation, held in Paris in 1790 on the first anniversary of the storming of the Bastille, were symbolic affirmations of the new order.

The new regime

The National Constituent Assembly completed the abolition of feudalism, suppressed the old "orders," established civil equality among men (at least in metropolitan France, since slavery was retained in the colonies), and made more than half the adult male population eligible to vote, although only a small minority met the requirement for becoming a deputy. The decision to nationalize the lands of the Roman Catholic church in France to pay off the public debt led to a widespread redistribution of property. The bourgeoisie and the peasant landowners were undoubtedly the chief beneficiaries, but some farm workers also were able to buy land. Having deprived the church of its resources, the assembly then resolved to reorganize the church, enacting the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, which was rejected by the pope and by many of the French clergy. This produced a schism that aggravated the violence of the accompanying controversies.

The complicated administrative system of the ancien régime was swept away by the National Constituent Assembly, which substituted a rational system based on the division of France into *départements*, districts, cantons, and communes administered by elected assemblies. The principles underlying the administration of justice were also radically changed, and the system was adapted to the new administrative divisions. Significantly, the judges were to be elected.

The National Constituent Assembly tried to create a monarchical regime in which the legislative and executive powers were shared between the king and an assembly. This regime might have worked if the king

had really wanted to govern with the new authorities, but Louis XVI was weak and vacillating and was the prisoner of his aristocratic advisers. On June 20–21, 1791, he tried to flee the country, but he was stopped at Varennes and brought back to Paris.

Counterrevolution, regicide, and the Reign of Terror

The events in France gave new hope to the revolutionaries who had been defeated a few years previously in the United Provinces, Belgium, and Switzerland. Likewise, all those who wanted changes in England, Ireland, the German states, the Austrian lands, or Italy looked upon the Revolution with sympathy.

A number of French counterrevolutionaries—nobles, ecclesiastics, and some bourgeois—abandoned the struggle in their own country and emigrated. As “émigrés,” many formed armed groups close to the northeastern frontier of France and sought help from the rulers of Europe. The rulers were at first indifferent to the Revolution but began to worry when the National Constituent Assembly proclaimed a revolutionary principle of international law—namely, that a people had the right of self-determination. In accordance with this principle, the papal territory of Avignon was reunited with France on September 13, 1791. By early 1792 both radicals, eager to spread the principles of the Revolution, and the king, hopeful that war would either strengthen his authority or allow foreign armies to rescue him, supported an aggressive policy. France declared war against Austria on April 20, 1792.

In the first phase of the war (April–September 1792), France suffered defeats; Prussia joined the war in July, and an Austro-Prussian army crossed the frontier and advanced rapidly toward Paris. Believing that they had been betrayed by the king and the aristocrats, the Paris revolutionaries rose on August 10, 1792, occupied Tuileries Palace, where Louis XVI was living, and imprisoned the royal family in the Temple. At the beginning of September, the Parisian crowd broke into the prisons and massacred the nobles and clergy held there. Meanwhile, volunteers were pouring into the army as the Revolution had awakened French nationalism. In a final effort the French forces checked the Prussians on September 20, 1792, at Valmy. On the same day, a new assembly, the National Convention, met. The next day it proclaimed the abolition of the monarchy and the establishment of the republic.

In the second phase of the war (September 1792–April 1793), the revolutionaries got the better of the enemy. Belgium, the Rhineland, Savoy, and the county of Nice were occupied by French armies. Meanwhile, the National Convention was divided between the Girondins, who wanted to organize a bourgeois republic in France and to spread the Revolution over the whole of Europe, and the Montagnards (“Mountain Men”), who, with Robespierre, wanted to give the lower classes a greater share in political and economic power. Despite efforts made by the Girondins, Louis XVI was judged by the Convention, condemned to death for treason, and executed on January 21, 1793; the queen, Marie-Antoinette, was guillotined nine months later.

In the spring of 1793, the war entered a third phase, marked by new French defeats. Austria, Prussia, and Great Britain formed a coalition (later called the First Coalition), to which most of the rulers of Europe adhered. France lost Belgium and the Rhineland, and invading forces threatened Paris. These reverses, as those of 1792 had done, strengthened the extremists. The Girondin leaders were driven from the National Convention, and the Montagnards, who had the support of the Paris sansculottes (workers, craftsmen, and shopkeepers), seized power and kept it until 9 Thermidor, year II, of the new French republican calendar (July 27, 1794). The Montagnards were bourgeois liberals like the Girondins but under pressure from the sansculottes, and, in order to meet the requirements of defense, they adopted a radical economic and social policy. They introduced the Maximum (government control of prices), taxed the rich, brought national assistance to the poor and to the disabled, declared that education should be free and compulsory, and ordered the confiscation and sale of the property of émigrés. These exceptional measures provoked violent reactions: the Wars of the Vendée, the “federalist” risings in Normandy and in Provence, the revolts of Lyon and Bordeaux, and the insurrection of the Chouans in Brittany. Opposition, however, was broken by the

Reign of Terror (19 Fructidor, year I–9 Thermidor, year II [September 5, 1793–July 27, 1794]), which entailed the arrest of at least 300,000 suspects, 17,000 of whom were sentenced to death and executed while more died in prisons or were killed without any form of trial. At the same time, the revolutionary government raised an army of more than one million men.

Thanks to this army, the war entered its fourth phase (beginning in the spring of 1794). A brilliant victory over the Austrians at Fleurus on 8 Messidor, year II (June 26, 1794), enabled the French to reoccupy Belgium. Victory made the Terror and the economic and social restrictions seem pointless. Robespierre, “the Incorruptible,” who had sponsored the restrictions, was overthrown in the National Convention on 9 Thermidor, year II (July 27, 1794), and executed the following day. Soon after his fall the Maximum was abolished, the social laws were no longer applied, and efforts toward economic equality were abandoned. Reaction set in; the National Convention began to debate a new constitution; and, meanwhile, in the west and in the southeast, a royalist “White Terror” broke out. Royalists even tried to seize power in Paris but were crushed by the young general Napoleon Bonaparte on 13 Vendémiaire, year IV (October 5, 1795). A few days later the National Convention dispersed.

The Directory and revolutionary expansion

The constitution of the year III, which the National Convention had approved, placed executive power in a Directory of five members and legislative power in two chambers, the Council of Ancients and the Council of the Five Hundred (together called the Corps Législatif). This regime, a bourgeois republic, might have achieved stability had not war perpetuated the struggle between revolutionaries and counterrevolutionaries throughout Europe. The war, moreover, embittered existing antagonisms between the Directory and the legislative councils in France and often gave rise to new ones. These disputes were settled by coups d'état, chiefly those of 18 Fructidor, year V (September 4, 1797), which removed the royalists from the Directory and from the councils, and of 18 Brumaire, year VIII (November 9, 1799), in which Bonaparte abolished the Directory and became the leader of France as its “first consul.”

After the victory of Fleurus, the progress of the French armies in Europe had continued. The Rhineland and Holland were occupied, and in 1795 Holland, Tuscany, Prussia, and Spain negotiated for peace. When the French army under Bonaparte entered Italy (1796), Sardinia came quickly to terms. Austria was the last to give in (Treaty of Campo Formio, 1797). Most of the countries occupied by the French were organized as “sister republics,” with institutions modeled on those of Revolutionary France.

Peace on the continent of Europe, however, did not end revolutionary expansion. The majority of the directors had inherited the Girondin desire to spread the Revolution over Europe and listened to the appeals of Jacobins abroad. Thus French troops in 1798 and 1799 entered Switzerland, the Papal States, and Naples and set up the Helvetic, Roman, and Parthenopean republics. Great Britain, however, remained at war with France. Unable to effect a landing in England, the Directory, on Bonaparte's request, decided to threaten the British in India by occupying Egypt. An expeditionary corps under Bonaparte easily occupied Malta and Egypt, but the squadron that had convoyed it was destroyed by Horatio Nelson's fleet at the Battle of the Nile on 14 Thermidor, year VI (August 1, 1798). This disaster encouraged the formation of a Second Coalition of powers alarmed by the progress of the Revolution. This coalition of Austria, Russia, Turkey, and Great Britain won great successes during the spring and summer of 1799 and drove back the French armies to the frontiers. Bonaparte thereupon returned to France to exploit his own great prestige and the disrepute into which the military reverses had brought the government. His coup d'état of 18 Brumaire overthrew the Directory and substituted the consulate. Although Bonaparte proclaimed the end of the Revolution, he himself was to spread it in new forms throughout Europe.

Additional Reading

JEREMY D. POPKIN, *A Short History of the French Revolution, 2nd ed.* (1998), is a brief overview of the event with bibliography. WILLIAM DOYLE, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* (1989, reprinted 1992); and DAVID ANDRESS, *French Society in Revolution, 1789-1799* (1999) are more detailed studies. SAMUEL F. SCOTT AND BARRY ROTHBAUS (eds.), *Historical Dictionary of the French Revolution 1789-1799, 2 vol.* (1985), is a reliable source.

To cite this page:

MLA Style: "French Revolution." Encyclopædia Britannica. Standard Edition. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 2008.

APA Style: French Revolution. (2008). Encyclopædia Britannica. *Standard Edition*. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica.

Britannica Style "French Revolution." Encyclopædia Britannica from *Standard Edition*. (2008).