

Chapter 15: The French Revolution

The French Revolution was a radical political transformation of what had been one of the most traditional and most powerful of the great European states in the space of a few short years. France went from a Catholic absolute monarchy to a radical, secular republic with universal manhood suffrage, a new calendar, a new system of weights and measures, and the professed goal of conquering the rest of Europe in the name of freedom, all in about five years. Even though the Revolution “failed” to achieve the aims of its most radical proponents in the short term, it set the stage for everything else that happened in Europe for the rest of the nineteenth century, with major consequences for world history.

The Causes of the Revolution

The immediate cause of the French Revolution was the dire financial straits of the French state after a century of war against Britain and an outdated system of taxation. As noted in the last chapter, starting at the end of the seventeenth century there was an (on-again, off-again) century of warfare between France and Britain, almost all of it fought overseas (in India, the Caribbean, and North America). With the noteworthy exception of the American Revolution, Britain won every single war. The major impact of the colonial wars between France and Britain in the eighteenth century on France was to push the state to the brink of bankruptcy - even as Britain funded its wars through the sale of bonds from the official national bank, the French state struggled to raise revenue. The loans it desperately sought had to be found from private banks, traders, and wealthy individuals, and the interest rates it was obliged to pay were punishingly high.

Not only did France lose much of its empire in Canada, the Caribbean, and India to the British, the state also accumulated a huge burden of debt which consumed 60% of tax revenues each year in interest payments. In turn, the problem for the monarchy was that there was no way to raise more money: taxes were tied to land and agriculture, rather than to taxes on commerce, and nobles and the church were exempt from taxation. As they had been since the Middle Ages, taxes were drawn almost entirely from peasant agriculture, supplemented by a few special taxes on commodities like salt. Since the nobility and church were all but tax-exempt, and the monarchy did not have a systematic way to tax commerce, there was a lot of wealth in France that the crown simply could not access through taxation.

In turn, the power of the nobility ensured that any dream of far-reaching reform was out of the question. There were about 200,000 nobles in France (which had a population of 26 million at the time). All of the senior members of the administration, the army, the navy, and the Catholic Church were nobles. The nobility owned a significant percentage of the land of France outright - about one-third - and had lordly rights over most of the rest of it. The pageantry around the person of the king and queen first established by Louis XIV continued at the palace of Versailles, but nothing changed the fact that noble wealth remained largely off-limits to the state and nobles exercised a great deal of real political power.

The one war in which France managed to defeat Britain was the American Revolutionary War of the 1770s and early 1780s. France subsidized the American Revolution and offered weapons, advisers, and naval support. The result was to push the state to the verge of outright bankruptcy, with no direct economic benefit to France from American victory. Traditionally, the French kings dismissed financial concerns as being beneath their royal dignity, but the situation had reached such a point of desperation that even the king had to take notice.

Starting in the early 1780s, the French King Louis XVI (great-great-great grandson of Louis XIV) appointed a series of finance ministers to wade through the mountains of reports and ledgers to determine how much the state owed, to whom, and how paying it back would be possible. Attempts to overhaul the tax system as a whole were shouted down by the major city governments and powerful noble interests alike. By 1787, it was clear that the financial situation was simply untenable and the monarchy had to secure more revenue, somehow. The king was at a loss of what to do. He reluctantly came to realize that only taxing the nobility and, perhaps, the church could possibly raise the necessary revenue. Thus, Louis XVI was up against the entrenched interests of the most powerful classes of his kingdom.

Events of the Early Revolution

When his efforts to increase tax receipts met with resistance from the nobility, Louis XVI first called an Assembly of Notables to deliberate with him. That Assembly consisted of the most powerful noblemen in France, who outright refused to grant new revenues to the crown. Louis reluctantly agreed to revive France's ancient representative assembly, the Estates General, in the hope of persuading that body to provide more revenue. For the first time in the history of French absolutism, a king was thus required to formally negotiate with his subjects simply to stave off bankruptcy.

The Estates General had not met since 1614. Like the British parliament, its original function was to serve as a venue for the French king to bargain with the entire nation for money,

almost always in the service of war. The Estates General was a gathering of representatives of the three estates - clergy, nobility, and everyone else - in which the French king could ask for tax revenue in return for various bargains and promises (often the promise not to ask for more taxes in the future). This had not happened for over 150 years, and thus no living French person had any experience of what to expect.

The result in the spring of 1789 was a surprisingly democratic election, with the majority of the male population voting for delegates to the Estates General. Many hoped that the meeting would result in royal intervention in a host of perceived injustices, not just more money for the state. Before the estates met, many voters and their representatives drew up lists of grievances demanding relief from unfair financial burdens imposed by the nobility, of better representation of townsfolk and peasants, and of royal intervention on behalf of the people of France, among other things. These political expectations rose at the very moment when the price of bread was skyrocketing - 1787 and 1788 had both seen very poor harvests, and there was widespread fear of outright famine. Even as members of the Third Estate drew up their lists of grievances, rumors were spreading that nobles and wealthy merchants were hoarding grain to drive up prices.

In the past, the Estates General had consisted of three separate groups, representing the clergy (the First Estate), the nobility (the Second Estate), and prosperous townsfolk (the Third Estate). In turn, voting was done by estate, not by proportional representation, with the first and second estates generally joining together to outvote the third. Thus, the small minority of the population that consisted of nobles and clerics could always outvote the majority of the population in this traditional system of voting. The problem for the political stability of the kingdom was that French society had changed enormously since the last meeting of the Estates General. Many of the representatives of the Third Estate thought of themselves as the representatives of France *itself*, since the immense majority of the population consisted of commoners and laypeople. The key issue was whether the king would allow voting to follow the number of representatives, which would give the Third Estate a clear majority, or if he would insist on the old model in which the clergy and nobility dominated.



The greatest painter of the revolutionary era, Jacques-Louis David, captured the moment in which the Tennis Court Oath was declared. Note the Catholic priest, Protestant minister, and agnostic “freethinker” embracing in the front of the crowd: religious divisions were to be laid aside in the name of national unity.

The King was, as was typical for Louis XVI, unsure of how to proceed. He addressed representatives of all three estates a few days later, promising reform, and when faced with continued defiance, he ordered the representatives of all three estates to join together in the National Assembly. As the crucial weeks of late June and early July unfolded, however, a faction of conservative nobles and the queen tried to persuade Louis to use force to eliminate what they correctly perceived to be a fundamental challenge to royal authority, and he cautiously moved forward with a plan to summon troops to watch over the proceedings.

In Paris, about twenty miles away, rumors spread that the king was going to crush the new National Assembly with force. As a result, crowds took to the streets on July 12th. On the 14th, a crowd searching for weapons overwhelmed the Bastille, a royal prison and arsenal, and murdered its guards. Soon, royal troops started abandoning their posts and joining with the rebels. This event, when a popular uprising in Paris spontaneously employed force to stave off

the threat of a royalist crackdown, remains the national holiday of the French Republic to this day, commemorated as Bastille Day. On July 16th the war minister advised the king that the army could no longer be relied upon. The king accepted the appointment of a liberal nobleman, Lafayette, as commander of a new "National Guard" and, reluctantly, committed himself to working with the National Assembly.

Meanwhile, rioting had spread to the countryside as peasants, learning of the developments in Versailles and Paris, sought to both feed themselves and to lash out against the nobility who, they thought, were driving them into destitution. Rumors spread among the peasantry that nobles were hoarding stores of grain, driving up prices and starving the peasants into submission. The result was the "Great Fear," in which peasants attacked and looted noble manors. Their main target was the debt ledgers that nobles kept on their peasants, which the peasants gleefully burned (thereby erasing their debts entirely - there was no such thing as a "backup copy" in 1789).

Under these circumstances of anarchy in the countryside, the National Assembly needed to do something dramatic to maintain control of the situation. On August 4, 1789, it voted to end feudal privilege (the landlords' rights to coerce labor and fees of various kinds from the peasantry), on August 14th it abolished the sale of offices, and on August 26th it issued a Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, modeled in part on the American Bill of Rights. In October, in a single bold stroke, the Assembly seized church lands and property, selling them at auction to fund the Revolutionary state itself. Finally, in early 1790 it abolished noble titles altogether, something that was almost redundant since those titles no longer had legal privileges associated with them.

The abolition of privilege meant that government - especially in the matter of taxation and law - should treat people as individual citizens rather than as members of social classes. People differed quantitatively in the amount of wealth they owned, but not qualitatively according to social rank or estate. Thus, in a shockingly short amount of time, the French state was forced to accept that legitimate power belongs to the nation as a whole, not to the king, and that every citizen should be equal before the law. The Revolutionaries summarized their ideals with the motto of "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" - to this day, the official credo of the French state.

“Equality”

Of the three elements of the Revolutionary motto, “equality” was in some ways the most fraught with implications. All of the members of the National Assembly were men. Almost all were Catholic - a few were Protestants, but none were Jews. All were white as well, despite the existence of a large population of free blacks and mixed-race inhabitants of the French colonies (especially in the Caribbean). The initial claim that all citizens ought to be equal before the law seemed straightforward enough until the Assembly had to decide if that equality extended to those besides the people who had held a monopoly on political representation of any kind in most of French history: property-owning male Catholics. The eminent historian of France, Lynn Hunt, in her *The Invention of Human Rights*, traces some of the ways in which the promise of “equality” brought about changes that the members of the Assembly had never anticipated early on - some of her arguments are presented below.

While some of the early Revolutionaries had spoken in favor of the extension of rights to Protestants before the Revolution, fewer had spoken on behalf of France’s Jewish minority. Despite misgivings from Catholic conservatives in the Assembly, Protestants saw their rights recognized by the end of 1789 thanks in part to the fact that Protestants already exercised political rights in parts of southern France. In turn, while the idea of legal equality for Jews was practically unthinkable before the Revolution, the logic of equality seemed to acquire its own momentum over the course of 1789 - 1791, with French Jews winning their rights as French citizens in September of 1791.

For both Protestants and Jews, the members of the Assembly concluded that religious faith was essentially a private matter that did not directly impact one’s ability to exercise political rights. Having already broken with the Catholic church - and seized much of its property - the Assembly now created a momentous precedent for religious tolerance. Religion was now officially stripped of its political valence for the first time in European history. This was more than a “separation of church and state”: it suggested that religious belief was in fact irrelevant to political loyalty and public conduct. Clearly, much had changed in the centuries since the Protestant Reformation unleashed its firestorm of controversy and bloodshed.

In the case of the blacks and mixed-race peoples of the French colonies, however, the Assembly at first showed little interest in extending any form of political rights. Several

members of the Assembly argued that slavery should be abolished, but they were in the minority. France's Caribbean colonies, above all its sugar-producing plantation colony of St. Domingue (present-day Haiti), produced enormous wealth for the French state and for numerous slave-based plantation owners and their French business partners. Thus, even those in favor of major reforms in France itself often balked at the idea of meddling with the wealth of the slave economies of the Caribbean. Once again, however, the logic of equality worked inexorably to upset centuries-old political hierarchies. Free blacks and mixed-race inhabitants of the colonies, once learning of the events in France, swiftly petitioned to have their own rights recognized. Much more alarmingly to the members of the Assembly, the slaves of St. Domingue (who comprised approximately 90% of its population) also learned of the Revolution and of its egalitarian promise.

The Assembly took steps to recognize the rights of free people of color only slowly at first. In the summer of 1791, however, a slave uprising in St. Domingue forced the issue. The Assembly desperately scrambled to maintain control of the situation, hoping in part to win over the free people of color in the colony to fight alongside white plantation owners to maintain control. Over the course of the following years, the rebellion in St. Domingue saw French authority destroyed, plantations overrun, and hundreds of thousands of slaves seizing their freedom. Having already lost control, the Assembly finally voted to abolish slavery entirely in February of 1794. Thus, unlike the cases of Protestant and Jewish enfranchisement, racial equality was only "granted" by the Assembly because it could not be maintained by force.



The slave rebellion in St. Domingue, soon to be the nation of Haiti, was led by Toussaint L'Ouverture, a former slave himself.

In the rhetoric of the Assembly, missing from the emancipatory logic entirely however, were women. There were no debates on the floor of the Assembly having to do with women's rights, in stark contrast to the lengthy arguments over religious minorities and the black inhabitants of the colonies. French men, radicals very much included, simply took it for granted that women were incapable of exercising political independence. Some women both in France and abroad, however, forcefully drove home the implication of the Revolution's promise of "equality," with the playwright Olympe de Gouges issuing a *Declaration of the Rights of Woman* in 1791 in parallel to the Assembly's 1789 *Rights of Man and Citizen*. In England, the writer Mary Wollstonecraft wrote one of the founding texts of modern feminism, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in 1792, that made a straightforward claim: the liberation of women would play a key role in the disintegration of unwarranted social and political hierarchy for all.

Neither work, however, inspired sympathy among the vast majority of the male population of France (or Britain), and as the Revolution grew more radical (see below), the members of the Assembly grew ever-more hostile to the demand for rights for women. De Gouges was eventually executed on orders from the Assembly as a "counter-Revolutionary," and the political clubs of women that had sprung up since 1789 were shut down. It would take the better part of a century for women to force the issue and begin the long, arduous process of seizing political rights.

The Radical Phase and the Terror

Until June of 1791, the National Assembly tried to build a constitutional monarchy, even as it faced increasing hostility among the great powers of Europe, all of which were monarchies, along with problems with inflation and hunger in the countryside. In June of 1791, the king and his family fled Paris, but were caught on the border (supposedly by a postal worker who recognized the king from his portrait on coins). It was soon discovered that the royal family had been corresponding with foreign monarchs and nobles, hoping to inspire an invasion from abroad to restore the king to the throne and to end the Revolution by force. The situation rapidly radicalized as the prestige of the king was destroyed overnight; even as the new French Constitution was formally passed in October of 1791, making France a constitutional monarchy, the king himself was under house arrest.

The latter situation prompted the kings of Austria and Prussia to call upon the monarchs of Europe to fully restore Louis XVI to control of his country, although they did not yet declare

war on France. Radical elements of the National Assembly, however, anticipated war and convinced the Assembly to declare a preemptive war on Austria in April of 1792; Prussia soon joined in an alliance with Austria against France. The Assembly dispatched the new National Guard and a hastily-assembled army, many of whom were former soldiers of the royal army, against the forces of Austria and Prussia along the French border.

In September of 1792, as the war began in earnest and the king languished in prison, a new constitution was instituted that formally abolished the monarchy and made France into a republic with universal manhood suffrage. This was the first time in the history of Europe that every adult male was allowed the right to vote regardless of wealth or status. In just over three years, France had gone from an absolute monarchy to the first major experiment in democracy since the days of the Roman Republic nearly two thousand years earlier.

In January of 1793, Louis XVI was executed as a traitor to the republic after heated debate and a close vote in the Assembly. The war grew as Britain and the Dutch Republic joined with Prussia and Austria against France, further increasing the military pressure on the French borders. The middle part of 1793 saw fear of foreign invasion and food shortages, along with royalist uprisings in parts of France itself. The result was the appointment of a dictatorial emergency committee, the Committee for Public Safety, headed by twelve of the most radical members of the republican government.



The aftermath of the execution of Louis XVI, with his head displayed to the crowd. He was executed by guillotine, the newly-invented 'humane' method of execution favored by the Revolutionary government.

The twelve members of this committee would rule France from September 1793 to July 1794 as a dictatorial council, charged with defending the Revolution from both its external enemies and internal rebels. It was extremely successful in the former regard, issuing a *levée en masse*, or total mobilization for war, which swelled the ranks of the French forces and held the Austrian and Prussian armies in check. Meanwhile, the Revolutionary government set up a subsistence committee to develop and elaborate a system of price controls, requisitions, and currency regulation, backed by police power. The committee restored order to rebellious areas by sending its members on missions with instructions for ruthless repression, again backed by violence.

Thus, just five years after the Revolution had begun, control was now in the hands of a small dictatorial committee of radicals who used violent repression to hold the nation together, continue the war against almost all of Europe, and soon, to pass even more radical measures. They made extensive use of the guillotine, a new "humane" technology of execution named after the medical doctor who invented it, and their leader was the (in)famous Maximilien Robespierre, whom his followers called "the Incorruptible" for his single-minded focus on seeing the Revolution succeed.

Under Robespierre's leadership, the Committee for Public Safety attempted to reorganize and "rationalize" French society as a whole, not just win wars. The Revolutionary government passed a number of radical measures under Robespierre's leadership. First, it sponsored the creation of the metric system. From a unsystematic smattering of different standards of weights and measures across France, the Revolutionary government oversaw the invention and use of a simple, unified system based on increments of ten (i.e. 100 centimeters is equal to 1 meter, 1,000 meters is equal to one kilometer, 1,000 grams is equal to 1 kilogram, etc.). Of all the changes instituted by the Revolutionary government during its radical phase, this was to be the most successful and long-lasting.

Since the members of the committee believed that not just France, but the world was on the threshold of a new era, they proclaimed the creation of a new calendar that began on September 22, 1792 (Day 1, Year 1), the day that the republic had been declared. All of history was to follow from that first day. Likewise, new ten-day weeks were introduced, with new four-week months named after their weather rather than arbitrary historical figures (e.g. the month of August, named after Augustus Caesar, was renamed "Thermidor," which means "hot." February became "Brumaire," which means "foggy," and April became "Prairial," meaning "springlike.") Year-end celebrations were planned to pay tribute to the Revolution itself in quasi-religious ceremonies presided over by republican officials.

In perhaps the most astonishing campaign, the Revolutionary state launched a major attempt to “de-Christianize” the nation, removing crosses from buildings and graveyards and renaming churches “temples to reason.” The cathedral of Notre Dame in the center of Paris was stripped of its Christian iconography, and Robespierre oversaw new ceremonies meant to worship a (newly invented) supreme being of reason. This was the culmination of the anticlerical measures that had begun in first year of the Revolution, with the seizure of church lands and property, but it now aimed at nothing less than the suspension of Christianity itself in France. In something of a symbolic parallel, the committee also had the bodies of dead French kings disinterred and dumped into a common grave (the corpse of Louis XIV landed on that of his grandfather, Henry IV).

To enforce its will and ensure “security,” the Committee for Public Safety oversaw what was later dubbed “The Terror,” as suspected traitors were arrested, interrogated, and confronted with the possibility of imprisonment or execution. While estimates vary considerably, somewhere between 35,000 - 55,000 accused enemies of the Revolution were executed or died in prison during the Terror, which was further intensified by widespread imprisonment (totaling half a million people, 3% of the adult population). To impose its policies on grain procurement and prices, the government had to rely largely on local organizations of militants who often terrorized the very peasants they were supposed to represent. Likewise, the most significant battles fought by French troops were against royalist (French) rebels, not foreign soldiers.

In fact, the bloodiest repression seen during the Terror happened far from Paris, and did not involve any guillotines. A western region of France, the Vendée, had been the site of the largest royalist insurrection against the Revolution in early 1793, featuring a rebel army of conservative peasants. It took until the summer for the royalists to be defeated, and in the aftermath of that defeat the revolutionary army inflicted a form of revenge against the people of the region that came close to outright genocide. Men and women were slaughtered regardless of whether or not they had participated in the uprising, villages were burned to the ground, and the death toll easily exceeded 100,000 people (some estimates place the number far higher).

Against the backdrop of the Terror, many members of the Revolutionary government itself began to fear for their lives. Likewise, the mandate for the committee’s very existence - protecting the Revolution against its foreign and domestic enemies - was made somewhat obsolete when French forces won major victories against Prussia and Austria in the summer of 1794. Robespierre inspired revulsion and fear among even some of his erstwhile supporters because of his fanatical devotion to the Revolutionary cause and his overt attachment to using terror to achieve his ends. Thus, in July of 1794 a conspiracy of worried Revolutionaries

succeeded in arresting, briefly trying, and then executing Robespierre as a tyrant. The Committee of Public Safety was dissolved.

After the fall of Robespierre the Revolution began to slide away from its most radical positions. A government of property owners took over under a new “Directory” in 1795, which rescinded price controls and ended the abortive attempt to de-Christianize the nation. A wave of reprisals against former radicals known as the “white terror” saw tens of thousands murdered (as many died in the white terror as had under the Committee of Public Safety’s campaigns of persecution). France remained at war with most of the rest of the Europe, even as royalist uprisings continued in areas across the nation itself. It was in this context of violence and insecurity that, In October of 1795, a young, accomplished general named Napoleon Bonaparte put down a royalist insurrection in Paris and came to the attention of ambitious politicians within the Directory.

Conclusion

The influence of the ideals of the French Revolution was fairly limited outside of France in its early years. Monarchs and social elites watched in horror as the Revolution radicalized, and the armies of states like Prussia and Austria sought to contain it even as their police forces cracked down on would-be sympathizers. All too soon, however, the Revolutionary armies had a new leader, one who would ultimately bring radical reform to much of Europe at the point of bayonet: Napoleon.

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