

## **The French Revolution, 1789–1795**

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### **Q. Why was the Absolutist regime in crisis?**

A. The Absolutist regime was suffering because of a combination of external and internal crises. Externally, France was seen as a weak and ineffectual power by the late 1780s, despite its successful support of American independence. The country was losing diplomatic influence rapidly in central and eastern Europe, having already lost its major overseas territories in North America and India a generation earlier. All this provoked a sense of crisis among the elites, and widely differing views on how to improve the state of the country arose. The key issue was finance. France's complex and inefficient systems of taxation could not support the burdens that previous wars had placed on them, and by the 1780s the treasury was spiralling into uncontrollable debt, threatening the literal bankruptcy of the kingdom. It was the irreconcilable differences between the most influential organizations in the country over the possible resolution of this crisis that propelled France into a more thoroughgoing political collapse.

### **Q. What were the Estates-General?**

A. The Estates-General formed the ancient consultative assembly of the kingdom, that had last met in 1614. This brought together the three 'Estates': the First Estate (the Catholic clergy); the Second Estate (the nobility) and the Third Estate (everyone else). In its absence, the role of political opposition had been taken on by France's highest law courts, the Parlements, who had blocked many proposed reforms in the 1760s, the 1770s and the 1780s, arguing that they violated the 'ancient constitution'. In the deeper crisis of the late 1780s, the Parlements would again refuse to raise new taxes, arguing now that only the Estates-General could legitimize such an innovation. Given that no-one in the late eighteenth century had more than a vague idea of how such a body should function, the agreement by the crown to summon it – in 1787, suggesting 1792 as a date, then in 1788, and finally being forced to bring it forward to 1789 by a catastrophic collapse in its finances – indicates the desperation of the search for a political solution that was under way.

When they were summoned in 1789, the Estates consisted of some 600 representatives of the Third Estate, elected in a multi-stage process that had started in individual villages; and 300 each from the other two Estates, also elected at the local level. All these 'deputies' brought with them *cahiers de doléances*, registers of their communities' grievances. It was the existence of these documents, written in an atmosphere of both political and sudden economic crisis, that would radicalize the situation towards a revolutionary outcome.

### **Q. What was the significance of the Tennis Court Oath?**

A. The Tennis Court Oath, taken on 20 June 1789, marked the decisive moment in the radicalization of the goals of the Third Estate deputies. Since the Estates-General met on 5 May, they had been agitating for the three Estates to unite as one – otherwise, they risked being outvoted 2-to-1 by the ‘privileged’ Estates. Since the Third Estate accounted for some 95 per cent of the population, this elementary demand for democracy seemed self-evident to their representatives, but of course it challenged the hierarchy of the existing order profoundly. A rolling dispute ensued, which saw the Third Estate gradually win over individuals from the other two, and rename itself the ‘National Assembly’ in early June. The Tennis Court Oath, a pledge to remain united until France had a new Constitution, came about because of a misunderstanding. Plans for the king to address the Estates on 23 June required their hall to be closed for redecoration – a closure interpreted by panicky deputies as an attempt at their suppression, leading them to gather in a nearby indoor tennis court to pledge their oath of unity. Nonetheless, it did draw them more tightly together, causing them to defy the king on the 23rd, and eventually leading to an unsuccessful attempt to suppress the growing revolution by force, that was met with the Parisian seizure of the Bastille on 14 July.

### **Q. What was the significance of the abolition of feudalism and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen?**

A. The abolition of feudalism – meaning the abolition of the special personal rights of privileged individuals in the nobility, and also the widespread system of exacting payments from the peasantry by ‘feudal’ or ‘seigneurial’ right – was part of an even larger abolition of privilege that marked the Revolution’s most decisive break with the past. It came about almost by accident on 4 August 1789, in an effort to pass legislation that would pacify widespread peasant unrest. The deputies (now including representatives of the two privileged Estates in the unified National Assembly) surrendered a huge host of privileges in a mood of collective enthusiasm, producing by default the idea of a society of equal citizens that would necessarily replace the abolished hierarchy of orders. It was this society of equals – equals in rights, if not in resources – that was codified by the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen on 26 August 1789.

Two important reservations have to be noted about this process. The first is that, for the peasantry, the real financial burdens of ‘feudalism’ were not abolished outright. Fees, dues and rents claimed on ‘feudal’ grounds were to be redeemed – bought back by their subjects in return for a sum equivalent to twenty or twenty-five years’ payments. In this way the National Assembly protected the principle of private property, but the peasantry mostly refused to pay, and grew increasingly resentful of this mistreatment.

The second reservation is that the Rights of Man was not a comprehensive charter of human rights. Although it rendered citizens equal before the law, it maintained a central role for the power of the state in determining that law, and the source of sovereignty that it enshrined was not the people, but the more abstract ‘nation’. As the political institutions of the new system emerged over the following year, they were structured specifically to exclude women and the poor, and to restore to France the kind of social stability which had been challenged by the upheavals of 1789.

### **Q. Why did the experiment in Constitutional Monarchy fail?**

A. The years 1790–1791 saw ever-growing political tensions within France. One major reason for this was the decision in November 1789 by the National Assembly to nationalize the property of the Catholic Church. This followed on from the ‘abolition of privilege’, and was seen as essential to resolve the state’s financial crisis – the seized lands would provide the capital to back a new issue of bonds called *assignats* that would pay off the state’s creditors. Fervent Catholics, including a sizeable proportion of the general population, found themselves unable to see interference in the organization of the Church as other than an attack on religion itself, however. The conflict was aggravated as the state tried to enforce a thoroughgoing reorganization of the Church itself, in line with a reordering of civil administration that had redrawn the internal map of France completely by mid-1790.

Meanwhile, among the nobility, there were many who rejected all the works of the Revolution, led openly by the king’s youngest brother, the comte d’Artois, who had fled abroad only days after the Fall of the Bastille. He led a growing group of émigrés – those who had emigrated – who were pledged to undermine the Revolution and restore noble privilege and Catholic supremacy. Both Queen Marie-Antoinette and King Louis XVI sympathized with these goals, and the extent of the king’s hostility was revealed on 21 June 1791, when the royal family were discovered to have fled Paris for the eastern frontiers. Their flight was blocked at the town of Varennes, and they returned to Paris amidst fears of invasion and civil war.

The National Assembly, however, needed the king – a republic was not considered seriously as a political option except by a few fringe radicals. Therefore, a deal was reached in which the Assembly proclaimed that the royal family had been kidnapped by émigré agents, but were now happily returned, and in September 1791 the Constitution was completed.

Radical opposition grew steadily, however, and by that autumn the new Legislative Assembly was politically dominated by men associated with the Jacobin Clubs. This extensive network of radical patriots resisted compromise with the king and the émigrés, and their leading figures increasingly preached war to cleanse the frontiers of the émigré threat, and to force the king to show his hand. War came in April 1792, and with it came disorganization and defeat – all of which was blamed by radicals on the king, his ministers, and noble generals. As total defeat loomed in July and August, republican feelings grew to fever pitch, and on 10 August the monarchy was overthrown by a Parisian attack on the royal palace of the Tuileries.

### **Q. What specific events now radicalized the Revolution and why?**

A. On 2 September 1792, with news arriving of Prussian armies over-running France’s last eastern fortresses, Parisian radicals began to execute suspected counter-revolutionaries in the ‘September Massacres’. Some 1,500 priests, nobles and common criminals died over five days. As well as dividing all revolutionaries even more firmly from their enemies, this also began to divide those same revolutionaries. France was declared a Republic on 22 September, with a new National Convention to give it a Constitution. The leadership of this body was split, however. Those who had called most vigorously for war the year before, now labelled as Girondins, were fearful of the social consequences of rising extremism – they and their supporters were propertied and respectable, whereas many newer activists were either disreputable (in Girondin eyes), or played far too visibly on a generalized hatred of

‘the rich’. Against the Girondins stood a group known as ‘the mountain people’, or Montagnards. They were far more willing to play up to the violent rhetoric of the sans-culottes, as the urban ultra-radicals were called, and the Girondins blamed key Montagnard figures for allegedly trying to wipe out the Girondins’ own leadership in the September Massacres.

These festering antagonisms rolled on through the trial and execution of the king in the winter of 1792–1793, with the Girondins unwilling to see him killed without some national referendum – a move that Montagnards and sans-culottes read as a bid to save the king, and hence as ‘counter-revolutionary’. Several more months of increasing hostility were resolved on 2 June 1793 by a purge of the Convention, which voted to exclude some 29 Girondin leaders under pressure from the massed ranks of armed sans-culottes.

This purge was seen in several major centres, including France’s three largest provincial cities, Lyons, Marseilles and Bordeaux, as an ‘anarchist’ attack on national figures – and itself as counter-revolutionary. Throughout the summer and autumn a new civil war raged between these ‘Federalist’ centres and national forces. This only added to the enormous problems that the Republic already faced.

France had declared war on all the major powers of western and central Europe by March 1793, along with all her minor neighbours, seeing them all as allies of the émigrés. To fight the massive war thus unleashed, new forms of conscription were introduced. In north-western France, this touched off civil war around the region known as the Vendée, where the rural population had been particularly resistant to the Revolution ever since the first actions against the Church in 1790. The Vendéan Revolt sucked in men and resources, and encouraged a brutalization of the conflict that further accelerated with the addition of the Federalist struggle. In September 1793, the Convention and its sans-culottes allies resorted to a formal declaration of the Terror against the Republic’s enemies.

### **Q. What were the subsequent stages of the French Revolution until 1795?**

A. The Terror lasted for ten months after September 1793. It was primarily a mobilization for war, involving the requisition of materials and labour on an unprecedented scale, and the creation of a million-strong army – albeit a poorly supplied and sometime ill-equipped one. The coercion of the rural population in particular, who saw almost all their food supplies taken for urban rations, required the other aspect of the Terror: its regimentation of political loyalties by force, and the suppression of dissent with the threat of internment and execution. Some 300,000 ‘suspects’ were locked up, and 17,000 were executed by Revolutionary Tribunals. Tens of thousands more died in the civil wars that continued to rage, and the Vendée saw wholesale massacres, with possibly over 200,000 deaths from the fighting, mass executions, and unchecked epidemic diseases that ravaged the war zone.

The politics of the Terror continued to harp on treachery and betrayal. The leading Girondins were executed after a show trial in October 1793, two weeks after Marie-Antoinette had endured a rain of slanders at her own trial, including charges of incest against her own son. But with enemies like these out of the way, continued insecurity and fear that the war was not going as it should led to repeated quests for new scapegoats. By the spring of 1794, the ‘incorruptible’ leader Maximilian Robespierre had orchestrated the trial and execution of ‘factions’ surrounding the sans-culottes leader, Hébert, and the more moderate republican hero, Danton. Hébert’s followers were guilty of wanting to purge the Convention again, and

Danton's of wanting to relax the Terror. Both courses of action were painted as counter-revolutionary plots, in an increasingly paranoid political culture.

The Terror accelerated in the early summer of 1794, as even the vestiges of a fair trial for suspects were removed, and far-fetched accusations of conspiracy saw prisoners guillotined in batches. By late July, Robespierre's attention had turned to the Convention again, with new accusations of hidden counter-revolution. Now, the majority realized that only an end to the Terror could ensure their own survival, and Robespierre was hounded from office on 27 July 1794 with trumped-up charges of dictatorial ambition. He and his supporters were executed without trial the next day.

With Robespierre's death, politics became more liberal – but this also meant that the sans-culottes urban activists, who were now branded as 'Terrorists', were themselves persecuted. This tended now to mean imprisonment rather than execution, although in southern France a culture of vendetta would see hundreds murdered over the coming years. French armies were now more successful – one reason why Robespierre's Terror had come to seem unnecessary – and over the following year the Convention was able to complete a new Constitution that envisaged a stable liberal system – an executive Directory of five men in place of the king, and a two-chamber legislature to prevent the dictatorship of a faction. Unfortunately, as the following years would show, the Terror had branded faction too deeply into the French psyche. Unrepentant radicals fought bitterly with open counter-revolutionaries and royalists, with the government reduced after 1797 to a series of coups against its own electorate to prevent a relapse into civil war. By the end of 1799, the military authority of General Napoleon Bonaparte, installed as First Consul by yet another coup, seemed the only way out.

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