

French Revolution

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(Redirected from [French revolution](#))

Jump to: [navigation](#), [search](#)

The **French Revolution** ([1789–1815](#)) was a period of political and social upheaval in the [political history](#) of [France](#) and [Europe](#) as a whole, during which the French governmental structure, previously an [absolute monarchy](#) with [feudal privileges](#) for the [aristocracy](#) and [Catholic clergy](#), underwent radical change to forms based on [Enlightenment](#) principles of [democracy](#), [citizenship](#), and [inalienable rights](#). These changes were accompanied by violent turmoil, including executions and repression during the [Reign of Terror](#), and [warfare involving every other major European power](#).

Causes

Main article: [Causes of the French Revolution](#)

Historians disagree about the [political](#) and [socioeconomic](#) nature of the revolution. Under one interpretation, the old aristocratic order of the [Ancien Régime](#) succumbed to an alliance of the rising [bourgeoisie](#), aggrieved peasants, and urban wage-earners. Another interpretation asserts that the revolution resulted when various aristocratic and bourgeois reform movements spun out of control. According to this model, these movements coincided with popular movements of the new wage-earning classes and the provincial peasantry, but any alliance between classes was contingent and incidental.

However, adherents of both models identify many of the same features of the *Ancien Régime* as being among the causes of the revolution. Among the economic factors were:

- A poor economic situation and an unmanageable [national debt](#), both caused and exacerbated by the burden of a grossly inequitable system of [taxation](#), the massive spending of [Louis XVI](#) and the many wars of the 18th century;
- High [unemployment](#) and high bread prices causing more money to be spent on food and less in other areas of the economy;
- [Food scarcity](#) in the months immediately before the revolution.^[1]

In addition to economic factors, there were social and political factors, many of them involving resentments and aspirations given focus by the rise of [Enlightenment](#) ideals:

- Resentment of royal [absolutism](#);
- Resentment by the ambitious professional classes towards noble privileges and dominance in public life;
- Resentment of [manorialism](#) (seigneurialism) by peasants, wage-earners, and, to a lesser extent, the bourgeoisie;
- Resentment of clerical privilege ([anti-clericalism](#)) and aspirations for freedom of religion;
- Aspirations for liberty and (especially as the revolution progressed) republicanism;
- Hatred toward the King for firing [Jacques Necker](#) and [Anne Robert Jacques Turgot, Baron de Laune](#) (among other financial advisors) who represented and fought for the people

Finally, perhaps above all, was the almost total failure of Louis XVI and his advisors to deal effectively with any of these problems.

[\[edit\]](#) Estates-General of 1789

Main article: [Estates-General of 1789](#)

The immediate trigger for the revolution was Louis XVI's attempts to solve the government's worsening financial crisis. In February 1787, his finance minister, [Charles Alexandre de Calonne](#), convened an [Assembly of Notables](#), a group of nobles, clergy, bourgeoisie, and bureaucrats selected in order to bypass the [parlements](#). Calonne asked this group to approve a new land tax that would, for the first time, include a tax on the property of nobles and clergy. The assembly did not approve the tax, instead demanding that Louis XVI call the [Estates-General](#). On August 8, 1788, the King agreed to convene the Estates-General in May of 1789. By this time, Jacques Necker was in his second turn as finance minister.

As part of the preparations for the Estates-General, *cahiers de doléances* (books of grievances) were drawn up across France, listing the complaints of each of the orders. This process helped to generate an expectation of reform of some kind.

There was growing concern, however, that the government would attempt to [gerrymander](#) an assembly to its liking. In order to avoid this, the *Parlement* of Paris proclaimed that the Estates-General would have to meet according to the forms observed at its last meeting. Although it would appear that the magistrates were not specifically aware of the "forms of

1614" when they made this decision, this provoked an uproar. The 1614 Estates had consisted of equal numbers of representatives of each estate, and voting had been by order, with the [First Estate](#) (the clergy), the [Second Estate](#) (the nobility), and the [Third Estate](#) (middle class and peasants) each receiving one vote.

Almost immediately the "Committee of Thirty", a body of liberal Parisians, began to agitate against voting by order, arguing for a doubling of the Third Estate and voting by headcount (as had already been done in various provincial assemblies, such as [Grenoble](#)). Necker agreed that the size of the Third Estate should be doubled, but the question of voting by headcount was left for the meeting of the Estates themselves. Fueled by these disputes, resentment between the elitists and the liberals began to grow.

Pamphlets and works by liberal nobles and clergy, including [comte d'Antraigues](#) and the [Abbé Sieyès](#), argued the importance of the Third Estate. As Antraigues wrote, it was "the People, and the People is the foundation of the State; it is in fact the State itself". Sieyes' famous pamphlet *Qu'est-ce que le tiers état? (What is the Third Estate?)*, published in January 1789, took the argument a step further: "What is the Third Estate? Everything. What has it been up to now in the political order? Nothing. What does it demand? To become something herein."

When the Estates-General convened in [Versailles](#) on [5 May 1789](#), lengthy speeches by Necker and Lamoignon, the keeper of the seals, did little to give guidance to the deputies, who were sent to separate meeting places to credential their members. The question of whether voting was ultimately to be by head or by order was again put aside for the moment, but the Third Estate now demanded that credentialing itself should take place as a group. Negotiations with the other two estates to achieve this, however, were unsuccessful, as a bare majority of the clergy and a large majority of the nobility continued to support voting by order.

[\[edit\]](#) National Assembly (1789)

Main article: [National Assembly \(French Revolution\)](#)



 Sketch by [Jacques-Louis David](#) of the National Assembly taking the [Tennis Court Oath](#)

On [10 June 1789](#) Abbé Sieyès moved that the Third Estate, now meeting as the *Communes* (English: "Commons"), proceed with verification of its own powers and invite the other two estates to take part, but not to wait for them. They proceeded to do so two days later, completing the process on [17 June](#).^[2] Then they voted a measure far more radical, declaring themselves the [National Assembly](#), an assembly not of the Estates but of "the People." They invited the other orders to join them, but made it clear they intended to conduct the nation's affairs with or without them.

In an attempt to keep control of the process and prevent the Assembly from convening, Louis XVI ordered the closure of the Salle des États where the Assembly met. Weather did not allow an outdoor meeting, so the Assembly moved their deliberations to a nearby indoor tennis court, where they proceeded to swear the [Tennis Court Oath](#) ([20 June 1789](#)), under which they agreed not to separate until they had given France a [constitution](#). A majority of the representatives of the clergy soon joined them, as did forty-seven members of the nobility. By [27 June](#) the royal party had overtly given in, although the military began to arrive in large numbers around [Paris](#) and [Versailles](#). Messages of support for the Assembly poured in from Paris and other French cities. On [9 July](#) the Assembly reconstituted itself as the [National Constituent Assembly](#).

[\[edit\]](#) National Constituent Assembly (1789–1791)

[\[edit\]](#) Storming of the Bastille

Main article: [Storming of the Bastille](#)



 The storming of the Bastille, [14 July 1789](#)

By this time, Necker had earned the enmity of many members of the French court for his support and guidance to the Third Estate. The queen, [Marie Antoinette](#), the younger brother of Louis, the [Comte d'Artois](#), and other conservative members of the king's [privy council](#) urged Louis to dismiss Necker. On [11 July](#), after Necker suggested that the royal family live according to a budget to conserve funds, Louis did just that. He fired Necker, and completely reconstructed the finance ministry at the same time.

Many Parisians presumed Louis's actions to be the start of a royal coup by the conservatives and began open rebellion when they heard the news the next day. They were also afraid that arriving Royal soldiers had been summoned to shut down the National Constituent Assembly, which was meeting at Versailles, and the Assembly went into nonstop session to prevent eviction from their meeting place once again. Paris was soon consumed with riots, anarchy, and widespread looting. The mobs soon had the support of the [French Guard](#), including arms and trained soldiers, because the royal leadership essentially abandoned the city.

On [14 July](#), the insurgents set their eyes on the large weapons and ammunition cache inside the [Bastille prison](#), which also served as a symbol of tyranny by the monarchy. After several hours of combat, the prison fell that afternoon. Despite ordering a cease fire, which prevented a mutual massacre, Governor Marquis [Bernard de Launay](#) was beaten, stabbed and decapitated; his head was placed on a pike and paraded about the city. Although the Parisians released only seven prisoners (four forgers, two noblemen kept for immoral behavior, and a murder suspect), the Bastille served as a potent symbol of everything hated under the [ancien régime](#).

Returning to the [Hôtel de Ville](#) (city hall), the mob accused the *prévôt des marchands* (roughly, mayor) [Jacques de Flesselles](#) of treachery; his assassination took place *en route* to an ostensible trial at the [Palais Royal](#).

The King and his military supporters backed down, at least for the time being. [Lafayette](#) took up command of the National Guard at Paris. [Jean-Sylvain Bailly](#), president of the Assembly at the time of the [Tennis Court Oath](#), became the city's mayor under a new governmental structure known as the *commune*. The King visited Paris, where, on [27 July](#) he accepted a [tricolore cockade](#), as cries of *vive la Nation* "Long live the Nation" changed to *vive le Roi* "Long live the King".

Necker was recalled to power, but his triumph was short-lived. An astute financier but a less astute politician, Necker overplayed his hand by demanding and obtaining a general amnesty, losing much of the people's favour. He also felt he could save France all by himself, despite having few ideas.

Nobles were not assured by this apparent reconciliation of King and people. They began to flee the country as *émigrés*, some of whom began plotting civil war within the kingdom and agitating for a European coalition against France.

By late July, insurrection and the spirit of [popular sovereignty](#) spread throughout France. In rural areas, many went beyond this: some burned title-deeds and no small number of [châteaux](#), as part of a general agrarian insurrection known as "la Grande Peur" (the [Great Fear](#)). In addition, plotting at Versailles and the large numbers of men on the roads of France as a result of unemployment led to wild rumours and paranoia (particularly in the rural areas) that caused widespread unrest and civil disturbances and contributed to the Great Fear (Hibbert, 93).

[[edit](#)] [Toward a Constitution](#)

Main article: [The Abolition of Feudalism](#)

On [4 August 1789](#) the National Constituent Assembly abolished [feudalism](#), in what is known as the [August Decrees](#), sweeping away both the seigniorial rights of the Second Estate and the [tithes](#) gathered by the First Estate. In the course of a few hours, nobles, clergy, towns, provinces, companies, and cities lost their special privileges.

Looking to the [Declaration of Independence](#) of the [United States](#) for a model, on [26 August 1789](#), the Assembly published the [Declaration of the](#)

[Rights of Man and of the Citizen](#). Like the U.S. Declaration, it comprised a statement of principles rather than a [constitution](#) with legal effect.

The National Constituent Assembly functioned not only as a [legislature](#), but also as a body to draft a new constitution.

Necker, Mounier, Lally-Tollendal and others argued unsuccessfully for a [senate](#), with members appointed by the crown on the nomination of the people. The bulk of the nobles argued for an aristocratic [upper house](#) elected by the nobles. The popular party carried the day: France would have a single, unicameral assembly. The King retained only a "suspensive veto"; he could delay the implementation of a law, but not block it absolutely.

On [5 October 1789](#) the people of Paris, mainly working women, marched on Versailles in what was the [Women's March on Versailles](#). The women were responding to their anger at the harsh economic situations they had to face such as bread shortages while the King and his court held banquets such as that for the royal guards on [October 1, 1789](#). They were also demanding an end to Royalist efforts to block the National Assembly and for the King and his administration to move to Paris in hopes for the poverty to be addressed. On [6 October 1789](#), followed by 20,000 National Guards, the King and the royal family moved from Versailles to Paris thus legitimizing the National Assembly.

The Assembly replaced the historic [provinces](#) with eighty-three [départements](#), uniformly administered and approximately equal to one another in extent and population.

Originally summoned to deal with a financial crisis, by late 1789, the Assembly had focused on other matters and only worsened the deficit. [Honoré Mirabeau](#) now led the move to address this matter, with the Assembly giving Necker complete financial dictatorship.

[[edit](#)] Revolution and the Church

Main article: [Dechristianisation of France during the French Revolution](#)

Main article: [Civil Constitution of the Clergy](#)

The revolution brought about a massive shifting of powers from the [Roman Catholic Church](#) to the state. Under the *ancien régime*, the Church had been the largest landowner in the country. Legislation enacted in 1790 abolished the Church's authority to levy a [tax](#) on crops known as the *dîme*, cancelled

special privileges for the clergy, and confiscated Church property. To no small extent, the Assembly addressed the financial crisis by having the nation take over the property of the Church (while taking on the Church's expenses), through the law of [2 December 1789](#). In order to rapidly monetize such an enormous amount of property, the government introduced a new paper currency, *assignats*, backed by the confiscated church lands. Further legislation on [13 February 1790](#) abolished [monastic vows](#). The [Civil Constitution of the Clergy](#), passed on [12 July 1790](#) (although not signed by the King until [26 December 1790](#)), turned the remaining clergy into employees of the State and required that they take an oath of loyalty to the constitution. The [Civil Constitution of the Clergy](#) also made the Catholic church an arm of the secular state.

In response to this legislation, the archbishop of Aix and the bishop of Clermont led a walkout of clergy from the National Constituent Assembly. The [pope](#) never accepted the new arrangement, and it led to a schism between those clergy who swore the required oath and accepted the new arrangement ("jurors" or "constitutional clergy") and the "non-jurors" or "refractory priests" who refused to do so. The ensuing years saw violent repression of the clergy, including the imprisonment and massacre of [priests](#) throughout France. The [Concordat of 1801](#) between Napoleon and the Church ended the dechristianisation period and established the rules for a relationship between the Catholic Church and the French State that lasted until it was abrogated by the [Third Republic](#) via the [separation of church and state](#) on [11 December 1905](#).

[edit] Appearance of factions

Factions within the Assembly began to clarify. The [aristocrat Jacques Antoine Marie de Cazalès](#) and the [abbé Jean-Sifrein Maury](#) led what would become known as the [right wing](#), the opposition to revolution (this party sat on the right-hand side of the Assembly). The "Royalist democrats" or *monarchiens*, allied with [Necker](#), inclined toward organising France along lines similar to the [British constitutional](#) model; they included [Jean Joseph Mounier](#), the [Comte de Lally-Tollendal](#), the [Stanislas Marie Adelaide, comte de Clermont-Tonnerre](#), and [Pierre Victor Malouet, comte de Virieu](#). The "National Party", representing the centre or centre-left of the assembly, included [Honoré Mirabeau](#), Lafayette, and Bailly; while [Adrien Duport](#), [Barnave](#) and [Alexander Lameth](#) represented somewhat more extreme views. Almost alone in his radicalism on the left was the [Arras](#) lawyer [Maximilien Robespierre](#). Abbé [Sieyès](#) led in proposing legislation in this period and successfully forged consensus for some time between the political centre and the [left](#). In Paris, various committees, the mayor, the

assembly of representatives, and the individual districts each claimed authority independent of the others. The increasingly middle-class [National Guard](#) under Lafayette also slowly emerged as a power in its own right, as did other self-generated assemblies.

[edit] Intrigues and radicalism

The Assembly abolished the symbolic paraphernalia of the *ancien régime*, armorial bearings, liveries, etc., which further alienated the more conservative nobles, and added to the ranks of the *émigrés*. On [14 July 1790](#), and for several days following, crowds in the [Champ de Mars](#) celebrated the anniversary of the fall of the Bastille; [Talleyrand](#) performed a mass; participants swore an oath of "fidelity to the nation, the law, and the king"; and the King and the royal family actively participated.

The electors had originally chosen the members of the [Estates-General](#) to serve for a single year. However, by the time of the [Tennis Court Oath](#), the *communes* had bound themselves to meet continuously until France had a constitution. Right-wing elements now argued for a new election, but Mirabeau carried the day, asserting that the status of the assembly had fundamentally changed, and that no new election should take place before completing the constitution.

In late 1790, several small counter-revolutionary uprisings broke out and efforts took place to turn all or part of the army against the revolution. These uniformly failed. The royal court "encouraged every anti-revolutionary enterprise and avowed none." ([François Mignet](#), *History...*, CHAPTER III)

The army faced considerable internal turmoil: General [Bouillé](#) successfully put down a small rebellion, which added to his (accurate) reputation for counter-revolutionary sympathies. The new military code, under which promotion depended on seniority and proven competence (rather than on nobility) alienated some of the existing officer corps, who joined the ranks of the *émigrés* or became counter-revolutionaries from within.

This period saw the rise of the political "clubs" in French politics, foremost among these the [Jacobin Club](#): according to the [1911 Encyclopædia Britannica](#), one hundred and fifty-two clubs had affiliated with the Jacobins by [10 August 1790](#). As the Jacobins became more of a broad popular organisation, some of its founders abandoned it to form the [Club of '89](#). Royalists established first the short-lived [Club des Impartiaux](#) and later the [Club Monarchique](#). The latter attempted unsuccessfully to curry public favour by distributing bread. Nonetheless, they became the frequent target

of protests and even riots, and the Paris municipal authorities finally closed down the Club Monarchique in January 1791.

Amidst these intrigues, the Assembly continued to work on developing a constitution. A new judicial organisation made all magistracies temporary and independent of the throne. The legislators abolished hereditary offices, except for the monarchy itself. Jury trials started for criminal cases. The King would have the unique power to propose war, with the legislature then deciding whether to declare war. The Assembly abolished all internal trade barriers and suppressed guilds, masterships, and workers' organisations: any individual gained the right to practice a trade through the purchase of a license; strikes became illegal.

In the winter of 1791, the Assembly considered, for the first time, legislation against the *émigrés*. The debate pitted the safety of the State against the liberty of individuals to leave. Mirabeau carried the day against the measure, which he referred to as "worthy of being placed in the code of [Draco](#)". (Mignet, *History...*, CHAPTER III) However, Mirabeau died on [2 April 1791](#). In Mignet's words, "No one succeeded him in power and popularity" and, before the end of the year, the new Legislative Assembly would adopt this "draconian" measure.

[\[edit\]](#) Flight to Varennes

Main article: [Flight to Varennes](#).

Louis XVI, opposed to the course of the revolution, but rejecting the potentially treacherous aid of the other monarchs of Europe, cast his lot with General Bouillé, who condemned both the emigration and the assembly, and promised him refuge and support in his camp at [Montmedy](#). On the night of [20 June 1791](#) the royal family fled the Tuileries wearing the clothes of servants, while their servants dressed as nobles. However, the next day the King was recognised and arrested at [Varennes](#) (in the [Meuse département](#)) late on [21 June](#). Though they were all dressed in servant's clothes, they rode in the royal carriage with the royal seal on the side. He and his family were paraded back to Paris under guard, and still wearing their rags. [Pétion](#), [Latour-Maubourg](#), and [Antoine Pierre Joseph Marie Barnave](#), representing the Assembly, met the royal family at [Épernay](#) and returned with them. From this time, Barnave became a counselor and supporter of the royal family. When they reached Paris, the crowd remained silent. The Assembly provisionally suspended the King. He and Queen [Marie Antoinette](#) remained held under guard.

[\[edit\]](#) Completing the Constitution

Main article: [The Last Days of the National Constituent Assembly](#).

With most of the Assembly still favouring a [constitutional monarchy](#) rather than a [republic](#), the various groupings reached a compromise which left Louis XVI little more than a figurehead: he had perforce to swear an oath to the constitution, and a decree declared that retracting the oath, heading an army for the purpose of making war upon the nation, or permitting anyone to do so in his name would amount to *de facto* abdication.

[Jacques Pierre Brissot](#) drafted a petition, insisting that in the eyes of the nation Louis XVI was deposed since his flight. An immense crowd gathered in the [Champ de Mars](#) to sign the petition. [Georges Danton](#) and [Camille Desmoulins](#) gave fiery speeches. The Assembly called for the municipal authorities to "preserve public order". The National Guard under Lafayette's command confronted the crowd. The soldiers first responded to a barrage of stones by firing in the air; the crowd did not back down, and Lafayette ordered his men to fire into the crowd, resulting in the killing of as many as fifty people.

In the wake of this massacre the authorities closed many of the patriotic clubs, as well as radical newspapers such as [Jean-Paul Marat's](#) [L'Ami du Peuple](#). Danton fled to England; Desmoulins and Marat went into hiding.

Meanwhile, a renewed threat from abroad arose: [Leopold II, Holy Roman Emperor](#), [Frederick William II of Prussia](#), and the King's brother [Charles-Philippe, comte d'Artois](#) issued the [Declaration of Pilnitz](#) which considered the cause of Louis XVI as their own, demanded his total liberty and the dissolution of the Assembly, and promised an invasion of France on his behalf if the revolutionary authorities refused its conditions.

If anything, the declaration further imperiled Louis. The French people expressed no respect for the dictates of foreign monarchs, and the threat of force merely resulted in the militarisation of the frontiers.

Even before his "Flight to Varennes", the Assembly members had determined to debar themselves from the legislature that would succeed them, the [Legislative Assembly](#). They now gathered the various constitutional laws they had passed into a single constitution, showed remarkable fortitude in choosing not to use this as an occasion for major revisions, and submitted it to the recently restored Louis XVI, who accepted it, writing "I engage to maintain it at home, to defend it from all attacks from abroad, and to cause its execution by all the means it places at my disposal". The King addressed the Assembly and received enthusiastic

applause from members and spectators. The Assembly set the end of its term for [29 September 1791](#).

Mignet has written, "The constitution of 1791... was the work of the middle class, then the strongest; for, as is well known, the predominant force ever takes possession of institutions... In this constitution the people was the source of all powers, but it exercised none." (Mignet, *History...*, CHAPTER IV)

[[edit](#)] [Legislative Assembly \(1791–1792\)](#)

Main article: [*The Legislative Assembly and the fall of the French monarchy*](#)

Under the [Constitution of 1791](#), France would function as a [constitutional monarchy](#). The King had to share power with the elected [Legislative Assembly](#), but he still retained his royal veto and the ability to select ministers. The Legislative Assembly first met on [1 October 1791](#), and degenerated into chaos less than a year later. In the words of the [1911 Encyclopædia Britannica](#): "In the attempt to govern, the Assembly failed altogether. It left behind an empty treasury, an undisciplined army and navy, and a people debauched by safe and successful riot." The Legislative Assembly consisted of about 165 [Feuillants](#) (constitutional monarchists) on the [right](#), about 330 [Girondists](#) (liberal republicans) and [Jacobins](#) (radical revolutionaries) on the [left](#), and about 250 deputies unaffiliated with either faction. Early on, the King vetoed legislation that threatened the *émigrés* with death and that decreed that every [non-juring clergyman](#) must take within eight days the civic oath mandated by the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. Over the course of a year, disagreements like this would lead to a [constitutional crisis](#), leading the Revolution to higher levels.

[[edit](#)] [War \(1792–1797\)](#)

Main article: [*French Revolutionary Wars*](#)

The politics of the period inevitably drove France towards war with [Austria](#) and its allies. The King, the Feuillants and the Girondins specifically wanted to wage war. The King (and many Feuillants with him) expected war would increase his personal popularity; he also foresaw an opportunity to exploit any defeat: either result would make him stronger. The Girondins wanted to export the Revolution throughout Europe and, by extension, to defend the Revolution within France. Only some of the radical [Jacobins](#) opposed war, preferring to consolidate and expand the Revolution at home. The Austrian [emperor Leopold II](#), brother of [Marie Antoinette](#), may have wished to avoid war, but he died on [1 March 1792](#). France declared war on

[Austria \(20 April 1792\)](#) and [Prussia](#) joined on the Austrian side a few weeks later. The invading Prussian army faced little resistance until checked at the [Battle of Valmy \(20 September 1792\)](#), and forced to withdraw. However, by this time, France stood in turmoil and the monarchy had effectively become a thing of the past.

[edit] Constitutional crisis

Main articles: [10th of August \(French Revolution\)](#), [September Massacres](#)



[edit] [10 August 1792](#) Paris Commune

On the night of [10 August 1792](#), insurgents, supported by a new revolutionary [Paris Commune](#), assailed the Tuileries. The King and queen ended up prisoners and a rump session of the Legislative Assembly suspended the monarchy: little more than a third of the deputies were present, almost all of them Jacobins.

What remained of a national government depended on the support of the insurrectionary Commune. When the Commune sent gangs into the prisons to try arbitrarily and butcher 1400 victims, and addressed a circular letter to the other cities of France inviting them to follow this example, the Assembly could offer only feeble resistance. This situation persisted until the [Convention](#), charged with writing a new constitution, met on [20 September 1792](#) and became the new *de facto* government of France. The next day it abolished the monarchy and declared a republic. This date was later retroactively adopted as the beginning of [Year One](#) of the [French Revolutionary Calendar](#).

[edit] [National Convention \(1792–1795\)](#)

Main article: [National Convention](#)



Execution of Louis XVI

In the [Brunswick Manifesto](#), the Imperial and Prussian armies threatened retaliation on the French population should it resist their advance or the reinstatement of the monarchy. As a consequence, King Louis was seen as conspiring with the enemies of France. [17 January 1793](#) saw King Louis condemned to death for "conspiracy against the public liberty and the general safety" by a weak majority in Convention. The [21 January](#) execution led to more wars with other European countries. Louis' Austrian-born queen, Marie Antoinette, would follow him to the guillotine on [16 October](#).

When war went badly, prices rose and the [sans-culottes](#) (poor labourers and radical Jacobins) rioted; counter-revolutionary activities began in some regions. This encouraged the Jacobins to seize power through a parliamentary [coup](#), backed up by force effected by mobilising public support against the Girondist faction, and by utilising the mob power of the Parisian *sans-culottes*. An alliance of Jacobin and *sans-culottes* elements thus became the effective centre of the new government. Policy became considerably more radical.

[\[edit\]](#) Reign of Terror

Main article: [Reign of Terror](#)

The [Committee of Public Safety](#) came under the control of [Maximilien Robespierre](#), and the Jacobins unleashed the Reign of Terror (1793-1794). At least 18,000 people met their deaths under the [guillotine](#) or otherwise; after accusations of counter-revolutionary activities. The slightest hint of counter-revolutionary thoughts or activities (or, as in the case of [Jacques](#)

[Hébert](#), revolutionary zeal exceeding that of those in power) could place one under suspicion, and the trials did not proceed scrupulously.

On [2 June](#), Paris sections — encouraged by the *enragés* ("enraged ones") [Jacques Roux](#) and [Jacques Hébert](#) — took over the [Convention](#), calling for administrative and political purges, a low fixed price for [bread](#), and a limitation of the electoral [franchise](#) to *sans-culottes* alone. With the backing of the [National Guard](#), they managed to convince the Convention to arrest 31 Girondin leaders, including [Jacques Pierre Brissot](#). Following these arrests, the Jacobins gained control of the Committee of Public Safety on [10 June](#), installing the *revolutionary dictatorship*. On [13 July](#), the assassination of [Jean-Paul Marat](#)—a Jacobin leader and journalist known for his bloodthirsty rhetoric—by [Charlotte Corday](#), a Girondin, resulted in further increase of Jacobin political influence. [Georges Danton](#), the leader of the [August 1792 uprising](#) against the [King](#), having the image of a man who enjoyed luxuries, was removed from the Committee and on [27 July](#), Robespierre, "the Incorruptible", made his entrance, quickly becoming the most influential member of the Committee as it moved to take radical measures against the Revolution's domestic and foreign enemies.

Meanwhile, on [24 June](#), the Convention adopted the first republican constitution of France, variously referred to as the [French Constitution of 1793](#) or Constitution of the Year I. It was ratified by public [referendum](#), but never applied, because normal legal processes were suspended before it could take effect.

Facing local revolts and foreign invasions in both the East and West of the country, the most urgent government business was the war. On [17 August](#), the Convention voted for general [conscription](#), the *levée en masse*, which mobilized all citizens to serve as soldiers or suppliers in the war effort. On [5 September](#), the Convention, pressured by the people of Paris, institutionalized *The Terror*: systematic and lethal repression of perceived enemies within the country.



[Guillotine](#): between 18,000 and 40,000 people were executed during the Reign of Terror

The result was a policy through which the state used violent repression to crush resistance to the government. Under control of the effectively dictatorial Committee, the Convention quickly enacted more legislation. On [9 September](#), the Convention established *sans-culottes* paramilitary forces, the *revolutionary armies*, to force farmers to surrender grain demanded by the government. On [17 September](#), the [Law of Suspects](#) was passed, which authorized the charging of counter-revolutionaries with vaguely defined *crimes against liberty*. On [29 September](#), the Convention extended price-fixing from grain and bread to other essential goods, and also fixed wages.

The [guillotine](#) became the symbol of a string of executions: Louis XVI had already been guillotined before the start of the terror; Queen Marie Antoinette, the Girondins, [Philippe Égalité](#) (despite his vote for the death of the King), [Madame Roland](#) and many others lost their lives under its blade. The [Revolutionary Tribunal](#) summarily condemned thousands of people to death by the guillotine, while mobs beat other victims to death. Sometimes people died for their political opinions or actions, but many for little reason beyond mere suspicion, or because some others had a stake in getting rid of them. Most of the victims received an unceremonious trip to the guillotine in an open wooden cart (the [tumbrel](#)). Loaded onto these carts, the victims would proceed through throngs of jeering men and women.

Another [anti-clerical](#) uprising was made possible by the installment of the [Revolutionary Calendar](#) on [24 October](#). Against Robespierre's concepts of [Deism](#) and [Virtue](#), Hébert's (and Chaumette's) [atheist](#) movement initiated a religious campaign in order to [dechristianize](#) society. The climax was reached with the celebration of the Goddess "Reason" in [Notre Dame Cathedral](#) on [10 November](#).

The Reign of Terror enabled the revolutionary government to avoid military defeat. The Jacobins expanded the size of the army, and [Carnot](#) replaced many aristocratic officers with younger soldiers who had demonstrated their ability and patriotism. The Republican army was able to throw back the [Austrians](#), [Prussians](#), [British](#), and [Spanish](#). At the end of 1793, the army began to prevail and revolts were defeated with ease. Suspects' goods were confiscated by the [Decrets of Ventôse](#) (February–March 1794), in order to prepare for the redistribution of wealth.

Because dissent was now regarded as counterrevolutionary, extremist *enragés* such as Hébert and moderate [Montagnard](#) *indulgents* such as Danton were guillotined in the spring of 1794. On [June 7](#) Robespierre, who had previously condemned the [Cult of Reason](#), advocated a new state religion and recommended that the Convention acknowledge the existence of [God](#). On the next day, the worship of the deistic [Supreme Being](#) was inaugurated as an official aspect of the Revolution. Compared with Hébert's popular festivals, this austere new religion of Virtue was received with signs of hostility by an amazed Parisian public.

In 1794, Robespierre had ultra-radicals and moderate Jacobins executed; in consequence, however, his own popular support eroded markedly. On [27 July 1794](#), the [Thermidorian Reaction](#) led to the arrest and execution of Robespierre and [Saint-Just](#). The new government was predominantly made up of Girondists who had survived the Terror, and after taking power, they took revenge as well by persecuting even those Jacobins who had helped to overthrow Robespierre, banning the Jacobin Club, and executing many of its former members in what was known as the [White Terror](#).

The Convention approved the new "Constitution of the Year III" on [17 August 1795](#); a [plebiscite](#) ratified it in September; and it took effect on [26 September 1795](#).

[edit] *The Directory (1795–1799)*

Main article: [French Directory](#)

The new constitution created the [Directoire](#) ([English](#): *Directory*) and created the first [bicameral legislature](#) in French history. The parliament

consisted of 500 representatives — *le Conseil des Cinq-Cents* (the Council of the Five Hundred) — and 250 senators — *le Conseil des Anciens* (the Council of Elders). Executive power went to five "directors," named annually by the *Conseil des Anciens* from a list submitted by the *le Conseil des Cinq-Cents*.

With the establishment of the Directory, the Revolution might seem closed. The nation desired rest and the healing from its many wounds. Those who wished to restore [Louis XVIII of France](#) and the [ancien régime](#) and those who would have renewed the Reign of Terror were insignificant in number. The possibility of foreign interference had vanished with the failure of the [First Coalition](#). Nevertheless, the four years of the Directory were a time of arbitrary government and chronic disquiet. The late atrocities had made confidence or goodwill between parties impossible. The same instinct of self-preservation which had led the members of the Convention to claim so large a part in the new legislature and the whole of the Directory impelled them to keep their predominance.

As the majority of French people wanted to be rid of them, they could achieve their purpose only by extraordinary means. They habitually disregarded the terms of the constitution, and, when the elections went against them, appealed to the sword. They resolved to prolong the [war](#) as the best expedient for prolonging their power. They were thus driven to rely upon the armies, which also desired war and were becoming less and less civic in temper.

Other reasons influenced them in this direction. The finances had been so thoroughly ruined that the government could not have met its expenses without the plunder and the tribute of foreign countries. If peace were made, the armies would return home and the directors would have to face the exasperation of the rank-and-file who had lost their livelihood, as well as the ambition of generals who could, in a moment, brush them aside. Barras and Rewbell were notoriously corrupt themselves and screened corruption in others. The patronage of the directors was ill-bestowed, and the general maladministration heightened their unpopularity.

The constitutional party in the legislature desired a [toleration](#) of the [nonjuring clergy](#), the repeal of the laws against the relatives of the [émigrés](#), and some merciful discrimination toward the émigrés themselves. The directors baffled all such endeavours. On the other hand, the [socialist](#) conspiracy of [Babeuf](#) was easily quelled. Little was done to improve the finances, and the [assignats](#) continued to fall in value.

The new [régime](#) met with opposition from remaining Jacobins and the royalists. The army suppressed riots and counter-revolutionary activities. In this way the army and its successful general, [Napoleon Bonaparte](#) eventually gained much power. On [9 November 1799](#) (18 Brumaire of the Year VIII) Napoleon staged the [coup of 18 Brumaire](#) which installed the [Consulate](#); this effectively led to his dictatorship and eventually (in 1804) to his proclamation as *Empereur* (emperor), which brought to a close the specifically [republican](#) phase of the French Revolution.

[\[edit\]](#) Historical analysis

The constitutional assembly failed for many reasons: there was too much monarchy to be a republic and too much republic to have a monarch; too many people opposed the King (especially after the flight to Varennes), which meant that the people who supported the King had their reputation slashed; the CCC ([Civil Constitution of the Clergy](#)) and many more.

Historian [François Furet](#) in his work, *Le Passe d'une illusion* (1995) (*The Passing of An Illusion* (1999) in English translation) explores in detail the similarities between the French Revolution and the [Russian Revolution of 1917](#) more than a century later, arguing that the former was taken as a model by Russian revolutionaries. This is in partial contrast with the Marxist tradition, which has usually claimed that the 1871 [Paris commune](#) was the Bolsheviks' primary inspiration source.