

MILESTONES
IN MODERN
WORLD HISTORY

1600 1750

1940 2000

**THE FRENCH REVOLUTION
AND
THE RISE OF NAPOLEON**



John C. Davenport

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The French Revolution and the Rise of Napoleon

JOHN C. DAVENPORT

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Chelsea House
An imprint of Infobase Learning
132 West 31st Street
New York, NY 10001

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Davenport, John, 1960–
The French Revolution and the rise of Napoleon / by John Davenport.
p. cm.—(Milestones in modern world history)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-60413-919-8 (hardcover)
ISBN 978-1-4381-3969-2 (e-book)
1. France—History—Revolution, 1789–1799—Juvenile literature. I. Title.
DC148.D38 2011
944.04—dc22 2011011610

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You can find Chelsea House on the World Wide Web at <http://www.infobaselearning.com>.

Text design by Erik Lindstrom
Cover design by Alicia Post
Composition by Keith Trego
Cover printed by Yurchak Printing, Landisville, Pa.
Book printed and bound by Yurchak Printing, Landisville, Pa.
Date printed: October 2011
Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

All links and Web addresses were checked and verified to be correct at the time of publication. Because of the dynamic nature of the Web, some addresses and links may have changed since publication and may no longer be valid.

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A Congress in Vienna

The battered remnants of the once-great French army limped through the snows of Russia. Of the more than 350,000 men who had confidently marched into the vast expanses of Europe's easternmost empire just a few months earlier, only a few tens of thousands now survived to endure the long trek homeward. Most of their comrades from the heady days of invasion had been left behind, either dead or in captivity. The same awaited any of the retreating soldiers who tarried along the icy roads leading to the west. The temperatures, already frigid, were still falling. The Imperial Russian Army was in close pursuit. Irregularly placed local troops and guerrilla fighters had hidden themselves along the line of retreat and harassed the Frenchmen unrelentingly. Ambushes and sniper fire made certain that even fewer French soldiers would leave the east alive.

Although broken and defeated as much by nature as by their Russian adversaries, the French troops, who now struggled across the seemingly endless miles of forest and steppe, carried with them memories of better days, days of victory and glory at places such as Valmy, Lodi, Arcola, Aboukir, Austerlitz, Jena, and Borodino. The men remembered not only the sweet moments of imperial triumph but also the revolutionary successes before those. So did the small, brooding general leading their forlorn march. He, too, had known victory and longed to recapture it. He wanted to hear his name cried out once more by delirious crowds and to hear his imperial title proclaimed through the streets of Paris again: Napoleon I, emperor of the French.

A WAR ENDS

Napoleon Bonaparte's defeat in Russia was just the beginning of the suffering for his once-invincible Grand Army. Bitter fighting still lay ahead for the army in its struggle against its Russian and British enemies, who were soon to be joined by forces from Sweden, Prussia, and Austria in their alliance against Napoleon. This new coalition would seal Napoleon's fate. In October 1813, his forces were decisively routed at the battle of Leipzig. Gathering together what remained of his command, the emperor fought on for another year, until April 6, 1814, when Napoleon abdicated his throne and accepted his opponents' offer of exile to the Mediterranean island of Elba, thus bringing to an end to more than 20 years of nearly constant warfare between France and its European rivals. The political upheaval and devastation that had begun in 1792 had left no part of Europe untouched. At one time or another, from Spain to the Netherlands to Italy, war ravaged the continent. Europe had bled; then, in the spring of 1814, it was over.

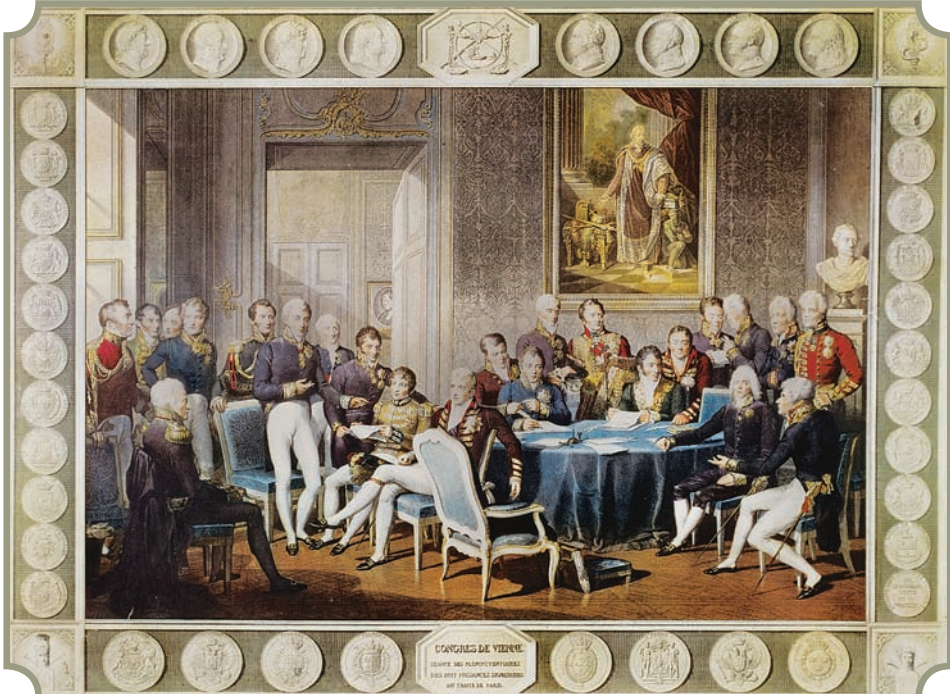
After forcing a peace treaty on the defeated French, the allied nations called for a convention to build a post-Napoleonic order in Europe. Within weeks of the peace, an order went

out from the victors stating that “all powers that participated on our side or the other in the current conflict will dispatch plenipotentiaries [representatives] to a congress to be held in Vienna.”¹ The invitees included representatives from Great Britain, Austria, Russia, Prussia, Spain, Portugal, and Sweden. Even France would have a voice at the Congress of Vienna, but it was clear to all that this was a meeting to impose, not negotiate, a settlement that would restore the political structures and arrangements that had existed *before* the French experiment with republicanism that ultimately led to the rise of Napoleon.

THE POWER OF VICTORY

Having emerged supreme on the battlefield, the victors of the spring of 1814 sought to consolidate their gains and establish an enduring European peace. Yet from the outset, the Congress of Vienna was a flawed affair. The delegates to the conference arrived in piecemeal fashion, without clear instructions from their home governments. Few understood the postwar situation in any depth. The French representative, Charles Maurice de Talleyrand, openly complained: “Not even the English, whom I thought to be more methodical than the others, have done any preparatory work.”² Nor was the general character of the negotiators well thought of by other participants. “Rotten, mediocre ministers,” one observer labeled them, “who conduct demoralized politics and who override the needs of their people with their own worm-eaten personalities.”³

Notwithstanding such harsh appraisals, the conferees understood the overall goals and objectives of the meeting. The victorious allies sought, in the most general sense, to bring Europe back to what it had been before the French Revolution, a time before France had exploded with republican zeal and sought to spread its version of liberty from the Atlantic Ocean to the Ural Mountains. The first step in this process was the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy.



During the Congress of Vienna, held from September 1814 to June 1815, ambassadors from various European states sought to settle the many continental issues stemming from the French Revolutionary Wars, the Napoleonic Wars, and the collapse of the Holy Roman Empire.

The Vienna talks, whatever else they did, had to result in the placement of a king back on the throne of France.

Yet underneath it all lay hidden an agenda that a more candid representative simply called “the secret affair of the Congress”—the frantic scramble by each nation to better its political and economic status relative to its neighbors.’ “There is a great jockeying for position by the vested interests,” he noted.⁴ All of the parties involved, winner and loser alike, sought to gain any advantage they could. Some sliver of territory here, a trade concession there—anything would suffice. Even the biggest loser at the table, France, grasped for the slightest strategic improvement in its otherwise horrendous

condition as a defeated nation. Talleyrand did his best to confound his diplomatic adversaries at every turn in the hopes of somehow reasserting France's place in the European balance of power. He held to bargaining positions stubbornly and used every available tactic to delay the proceedings. By October 1814, little of any real substance had been accomplished. "Our conference is not progressing at all," a frustrated delegate reported home. "Nothing is decided, nothing is agreed."⁵

With gridlock evident at the bargaining table, the representatives consoled themselves with an endless series of banquets, balls, parties, and other frivolities. Elaborate and lengthy dinner parties were commonplace and boasted menus filled with exotic delicacies. Diners could choose from a variety of meats, vegetables, seafood, and poultry for main courses; oysters and truffles were particular favorites. An array of fruit dishes was served throughout. Desserts often consisted of any combination of pineapples, cherries, strawberries, and the most elaborate pastries and cakes imaginable. Austria's delegate, the foreign minister Klemens von Metternich, routinely hosted parties of up to 250 guests each night. At these candlelit extravaganzas, jewel-bedecked women flirted with politicians and military officers of the highest ranks. In some celebrated instances, such flirtations blossomed into very public and embarrassing sexual indiscretions, such as the famous love triangle that came to involve Metternich himself, his beautiful mistress, and Czar Alexander I of Russia.

Not every congress attendee, however, had the time and the inclination to engage in such dalliances. Britain's representative, Robert Stewart, Lord Castlereagh, for one, had little interest in diversions from the important work at hand. In December 1814, his energies—recently freed from the distraction of the War of 1812 with the United States—were turned toward the goal of ensuring that any future European system would be managed from London. He felt justified in doing so. Great Britain had, after all, won the war against France at sea

almost single-handedly, contributed to the land war by driving Napoleon from Spain, and possessed Europe's strongest and most vibrant economy. Castlereagh saw Britain as the new order's natural leader. His task would be to secure that position through hard bargaining. As yet, though, nothing had occurred that might shake the congress from its diplomatic slumber. Napoleon would soon change that.

100 DAYS TO WATERLOO

By February 1815, the Congress of Vienna had been stumbling along for nearly eight months with no measurable progress toward a definitive European settlement. Through it all, the man whose career had served as the impetus for the conference sat frustrated and bored on the island of Elba. Napoleon had ruled this tiny domain as an empire in miniature for almost a year. He had issued orders and had written edicts, had commanded a small guard of soldiers, and had lived well enough to become slightly overweight. The former emperor of the French, however, was running short of money and had heard rumors of a possible transfer to the remote South Atlantic island of St. Helena. Penniless and stranded on some forsaken rock in the middle of the ocean was not how the man whose name once struck terror into the hearts of his foes wanted to end his life.

Napoleon, therefore, decided to follow up on stories he had heard of discontent in France with the policies of the newly installed Bourbon monarch, Louis XVIII. The French people, reliable informants told Napoleon, chafed under the renewed burden of royal authority and the revived privileges of a freshly empowered nobility. Despite Bourbon propaganda that claimed that "in a few years not even a good-for-nothing vagabond will mention" Napoleon's name, many French fondly recalled Napoleon and the days of conquest and glory he had given to them.⁶ Napoleon himself had received anonymous letters begging him to return home and restore France to

power and prosperity. One letter writer told Napoleon simply, “They are waiting for you.”⁷

Encouraged, Napoleon took bold and provocative action. On February 26, 1815, he escaped from Elba for France with the 1,200 soldiers allotted to him by treaty, aboard the ship *Inconstant*. His goal was Paris, where he hoped to once again wear the emperor’s crown. His departure did not go unnoticed. On March 7, Metternich was awakened by a courier who “brought me, about six in the morning, an express dispatch marked URGENT. . . . I read ‘[Napoleon] has disappeared from Elba.’”⁸ Six days later, the Congress of Vienna officially declared Napoleon an outlaw and made preparations to repulse his small force as it approached Paris. That same day, upon learning that Napoleon was getting closer, Louis XVIII fled the capital in terror. His subjects, on the other hand, eagerly anticipated the former emperor’s return. When news of Napoleon’s march inland toward Paris was confirmed, jubilation filled the streets. The “truth comes out like a thunderclap,” an excited Parisian wrote. “Napoleon was in France. . . . The soldiers flocked to their general and nothing opposed his triumphal march.”⁹ Humiliated by defeat, ignored by many of their countrymen, and longing for fresh glory, veterans massed around Napoleon, forming the nucleus of a new army of empire. Napoleon’s wife, Marie-Louise, however, was far from enthusiastic about any likely reunion. Having returned to her Austrian homeland after Napoleon’s surrender in 1814, Marie-Louise wanted nothing to do with her former husband; she “doesn’t mention Napoleon,” a confidante noted.¹⁰

Welcomed or not, the former emperor entered Paris on March 20, 1815. The Congress of Vienna, faced with a challenge to its very reason for being, suspended its sessions in order to concentrate on bringing Napoleon to battle. Led by Great Britain, the nations that were previously allied against France steeled themselves once again for war. The decisive

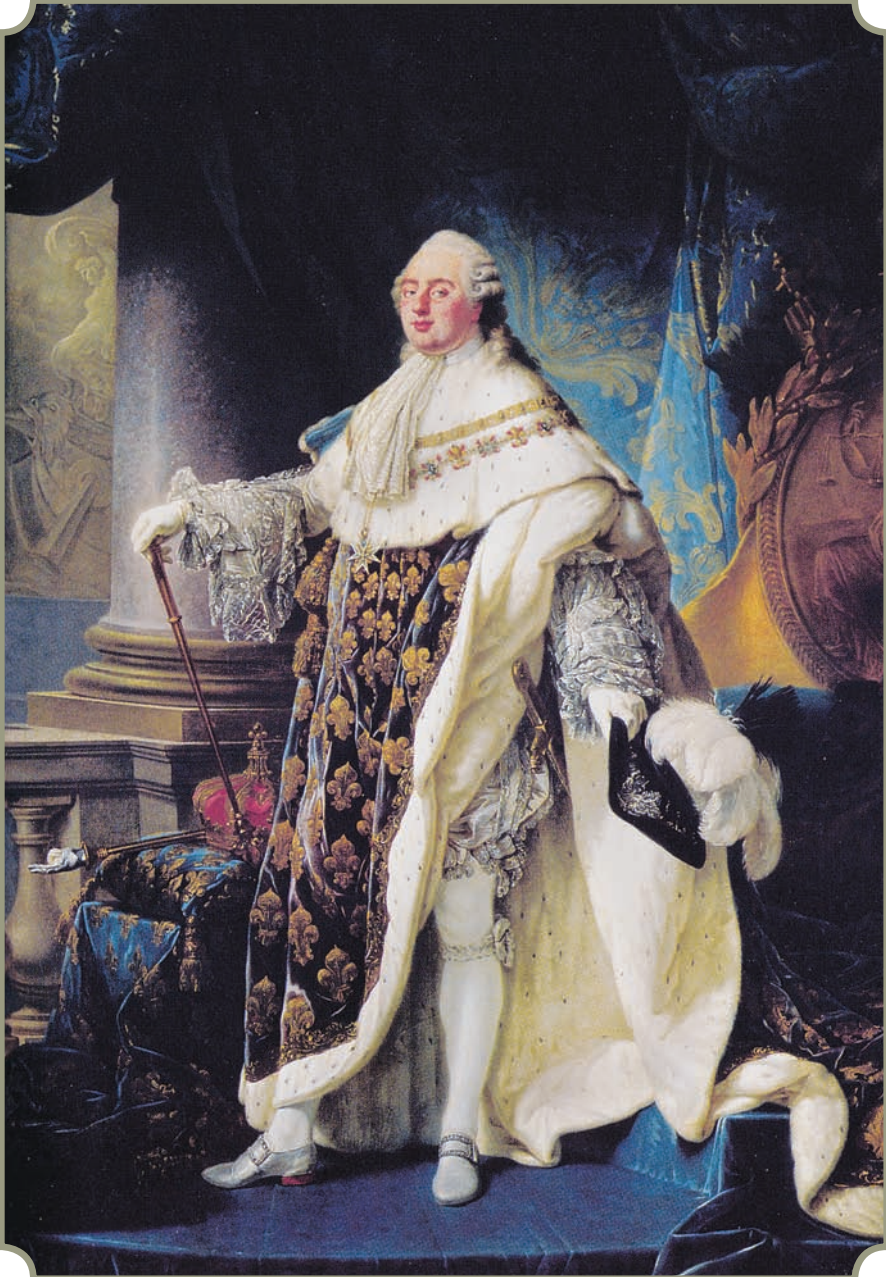
engagement that they sought with the seemingly indomitable Napoleon Bonaparte would come in June at a place called Waterloo. Napoleon's defeat there would bring down the final curtain on a drama that had begun 26 years earlier in one of history's greatest social, political, and cultural upheavals: the French Revolution.



Monarchs, Money, and America

The nineteenth-century French author Alexis de Tocqueville once wrote of the French Revolution that “never was any such event, stemming from factors so far back in the past, so inevitable and yet so completely unforeseen.”¹ For centuries, dating back to medieval times, European kings had ruled as absolute monarchs, a status marked by the belief that God ordained royal authority. This so-called “divine right of kings” placed the monarch high on a pinnacle of a natural order that connected heaven and earth. According to advocates of this doctrine, the king could do no wrong since he was placed there by God. The principle therefore suggested that if one were to depose a monarch—or even limit his or her powers—it would be a sacrilegious act against God’s will.

God made kings, and kings made countries. Therefore, kings and kingdoms were one and the same. Louis XIV, for



Louis XVI of France ruled as king of France 1774 until his arrest during the French Revolution in 1792. He was executed by guillotine on January 21, 1793, by the new revolutionary French government.

example, took for granted that he not only was the king of France but was France itself. “*L’Etat c’est moi* (‘I am the state’),” he is said to have declared in 1655. “It is in my person alone,” Louis XV boasted more than 100 years later, “that sovereign power resides. . . . The whole public order emanates from me, and the rights and interests of the nation . . . are necessarily joined with mine and rest only in my hands.”²

The most visible sign of divine-right rule in France was the palace complex occupied by the king at Versailles. Traditionally, the king’s place had been among his people in the city of Paris, but early in his reign, Louis XIV moved the seat of power to Versailles, a country village outside of the capital. More than simply a collection of buildings, the small city constructed by Louis represented “a whole society in miniature,” a lavish product of the king’s vanity.³ At Versailles, Louis XIV collected his entire government, the nobility, craftspeople, servants, priests, and soldiers. Opulent, beautiful, and utterly detached from the daily reality of life in France, the palace at Versailles stood as a monument to the idea and substance of absolutism through the reign of Louis XVI.

Such extravagance did not go unnoticed. Intellectuals, in particular, criticized excess as an example of the corruption inherent in governance without limit. Deeply influenced by British philosophers such as John Locke and David Hume, French philosophers such as Louis Secondat, Montesquieu, Francois Voltaire, Denis Diderot, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau questioned the core values of the French monarchy and challenged the idea that a king could rule with impunity. They extolled the virtues of a novel social model within which law, limited government, and, above all, natural rights guided the affairs of state. As Rousseau famously put it in his book *The Social Contract*, royal “might does not make right . . . and we are obliged to obey none but legitimate Power.”⁴ Rousseau and others believed the only legitimate power was one that was bound by law and drew its authority from the people.

A REVOLUTION IN AMERICA

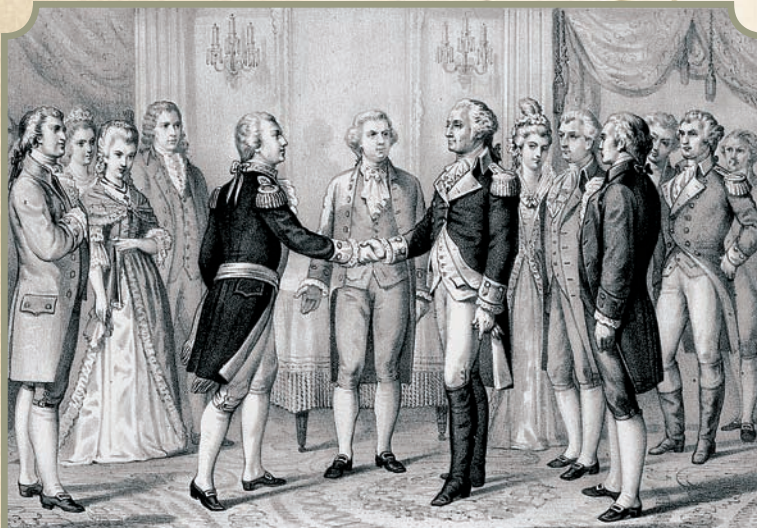
With such ideas floating freely, it is no surprise that the American Revolutionary War (1775–1783) produced a dramatic narrative that entranced many in France. French intellectuals and common folk alike celebrated the American revolutionaries' quest for liberty from Great Britain in a new world that seemed created precisely for freedom. The *Gazette de France*, for example, as early as April 1774, argued that in America “an innate taste for liberty is inseparable from the soil, the sky, the forests, and lakes.”⁵ Once the fighting began and the American colonies committed themselves to shaking off bonds of royal authority and legitimacy, it became clear that liberty meant a

THE MARQUIS DE LAFAYETTE

Born in September 1757, Marie-Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert Motier began life as a privileged nobleman who inherited his father's fortune and his aristocratic title, becoming the Marquis de Lafayette. He joined the army at a young age but quickly became bored with peacetime service. When the American Revolution broke out, Lafayette eagerly volunteered for American service and was granted a commission as major general in the Continental Army in 1777; he was only 19. During the war, Lafayette served as one of General George Washington's most trusted advisers and aides, fighting alongside the future first president of the United States at the battles of Brandywine Creek (1777) and Yorktown (1781). After returning to France and serving as an officer in the revolutionary French Army, Lafayette became disillusioned with the Legislative Assembly and defected to Austria in 1792. He was quickly imprisoned and did not return home until 1799. Lafayette died in May 1834.

political state without kings. According to Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence of 1776, God had not only made human beings equal but had also given them the right to rebel against the idea of a monarchy itself in order to secure their innate freedoms.

French readers devoured stories of the revolutionary unrest leading up to the American Revolution and followed closely the campaigns and battles that ensued. A veritable mania soon developed in France for all things American and revolutionary. In the southern port city of Marseilles, one group of America-obsessed Frenchmen limited membership in their new social club to 13 members, matching the number



THE FIRST MEETING OF WASHINGTON AND LAFAYETTE.

Philadelphia, August 3^d 1777.

Seen here, a circa-1777 illustration of the first meeting of the Marquis de Lafayette (*left*) and General George Washington in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Lafayette later served on Washington's staff during the American Revolution.

of American colonies in rebellion. Each member was then required to choose a colony and wear its emblem to all gatherings. Extending the practice, the club held picnics on the thirteenth day of every month, during which the men drank 13 toasts to the American insurgents, as the rebels came to be called in France. Statuettes of the wildly popular American thinker and statesman Benjamin Franklin were so sought after that a newspaper in Paris held them up as evidence that the American Revolution “may truly be said to be i-doll-ized in this country.”⁶

Interestingly, the fervor for the American cause that swept through the French public percolated upward through the nobility and eventually emerged within the royal court. The French aristocrat Marie-Joseph Motier (popularly known as the Marquis de Lafayette) even left to join the ranks of the American resistance as a major general. At Versailles, the hope was for a British defeat—the belief being that a loss for their old British rivals would be a boon for the French. Influential men surrounding King Louis XVI urged him to provide the Americans with badly needed stocks of gunpowder, bayonets, and muskets. Although strong opposition to such material assistance came from the king’s finance minister, Jacques Turgot, and from the king’s own wife, Marie-Antoinette, Louis ultimately decided to offer guns and ammunition to the Americans.

Beginning in late 1776, covert arms shipments flowed across the Atlantic under the cover of a fake Spanish shipping company. Two years later, with the conclusion of the Treaty of Amity and Commerce between France and the self-declared independent United States of America, soldiers and cash also began to arrive on American shores from France. Negotiated by Franklin, the treaty offered not only supplies but also a professional French army to help the revolutionaries secure victory. When that moment came in 1783, the United States could credit its birth to French money, arms, and blood.

THE PRICE OF SUCCESS

Long before the French army stood beside its American ally in victory, Turgot had predicted that “the first shot [of a new war] will drive the state to bankruptcy.”⁷ That prediction very soon came true. The eighteenth century had been a time of nearly constant warfare for France. The nation had fought three continental wars between 1701 and 1763, costing France the equivalent of billions in modern dollars. All of the conflicts had been paid for through massive borrowing. By 1763, 60 percent of the French national budget was being given over to servicing the debt, and this was before the American war added the equivalent of an additional \$5 billion (in modern money) to it.

The war, in fact, left the royal finances in a shambles, but the ideas brought home from America by returning French soldiers eventually proved to be more dangerous. Years in America allowed French soldiers an opportunity to absorb many of the republican ideals and values that drove the colonial rebels. After the American war, Marie-Antoinette’s own foster brother was moved to comment on the way in which all those “warriors in the prime of life who had run to fight in the New World had departed Frenchmen and returned Americans.”⁸

Having developed a taste for liberty, Louis XVI’s soldiers came home determined to satisfy their appetite for it in France. Exposure to republican government in America at its inception provoked one young soldier to exclaim to his wife how the first-hand experience of revolutionary freedom “inspires in me the liveliest enthusiasm and I would like my own country to enjoy such a liberty.”⁹ Even the redoubtable Marquis de Lafayette was said to have come back from America “to his native country, full of the burning desire . . . [for] an exotic liberty.”¹⁰ The marquis himself excitedly forecast that the “era of the American Revolution . . . [is] the beginning of a new social order for the entire world.”¹¹

Even a foreigner could sense a difference in France after the American war. An English visitor in the mid-1780s noticed

the changes wrought in the French mindset by the spectacle of watching a people throw off the yoke of monarchy in exchange for the mantle of a republic. Writing home, the tourist reported the presence of “a strong leaven of liberty, increasing every hour since the American Revolution.”¹² All that was needed now to produce a burst of revolutionary energy in France were the catalysts of popular unrest and political paralysis. Both were fast becoming facts of life as Louis XVI’s kingdom drifted toward chaos and collapse.



The Estates Meet

In prerevolutionary France, the French state was divided into three classes, or estates, each with its own agenda, each on a collision course with the others.

Of the three, the First Estate represented nearly 130,000 Catholic clergymen spread across France and was fiercely “proud of its influence and its riches.”¹ Prohibited from most forms of common employment, France’s priests and bishops lived off of special church taxes, called tithes, collected from the laypeople residing on Church land. These tithes ranged from 10 percent to 25 percent of a person’s total income. Given that one-tenth of France was then in the clerical domain, it is no surprise that the Church reaped millions of *livres* (the royal currency) annually from this one source. During the 1780s alone, the Church raked in the equivalent of nearly \$500 million in modern money from tithes.

The Second Estate comprised the nobility, which, while still numerically large, was said to have lost “its ancient splendor . . . and had entirely decayed” by the late eighteenth century.² A holdover from feudal times, the French nobility was composed of two very different groups of individuals and families, both exempt from all but a few of the taxes levied on the rest of France. Those nobles who held their title by virtue of centuries-old lineage were known as “the nobility of the sword”; those doing so by way of more recent ancestry filled the ranks of what was called “the nobility of the robe.” Sword nobles dominated certain government sectors and the officer corps of France’s army and navy. Robe nobles made up the kingdom’s economic elite and controlled most of its trade, financing, and manufacturing.

The Third Estate represented the vast majority of Louis XVI’s subjects and was, in the words of the radical clergyman Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, “everything that makes up the nation . . . EVERYTHING.”³ The Third Estate included farmers, rural laborers, craftspeople, urban workers, lawyers, teachers, and small businessmen. Covering such a wide range of common people, the Third Estate represented interests that were very different from and often in direct conflict with those of the other two. Many, if not most, of the members of the Third Estate, moreover, saw nothing in the First and Second except social snobbery, undeserved privileges, and economic oppression.

Perched atop this triple-tiered structure was the Bourbon monarch himself, Louis XVI. A grandson of Louis XV, he was born in 1754 and set on the path to the throne by his father’s premature death. At the age of 15, in 1770, he married a shallow but clever Austrian princess, Marie-Antoinette, who also was just 15. It took the young couple 11 years to produce their first child, a baby boy destined to die before reaching the age of nine. Of Louis and Marie-Antoinette’s five other children, three died at birth or soon afterward. Two eventually survived, a daughter and a son, the latter expected to become Louis XVII.



In prerevolutionary France, society was divided into three estates. In this French revolutionary cartoon from 1789, the Third Estate—the peasantry—holds up the other two estates, the clergy and the nobility.

Louis XVI wore the crown uncomfortably. Even before his coronation in 1774, he emphasized that his greatest desire was to be popular with his soon-to-be subjects: “I wish to be loved.”⁴ Quiet, retiring, and indecisive, Louis failed to impress anyone when he finally ascended the throne. His intellect was weak, and his physical appearance was ungainly. The wife of one of his chief ministers commented, “Nature made him an ordinary man, who would have done well in some obscure station.”⁵ Totally unprepared to be the king of France, Louis turned the management of his state over to his advisers and stood back as French finances dissolved into a sea of red ink. The king, in fact, literally stood back from it all by retreating to his palace complex at Versailles, where he devoted his days to his family and his hobbies. While France teetered on the brink of fiscal collapse, its king sat in his own private world, playing with his toys, hunting on his private 100,000-acre (40,468-hectares) preserve, and consuming nearly 5 percent of the nation’s revenues with his lavish lifestyle.

A CALL TO VERSAILLES

Louis, however, could not avoid dealing with France’s problems indefinitely. With the economy near collapse, class divisions tore the kingdom’s social fabric as never before. By the winter of 1787–1788, food prices were soaring and wages were stagnating as the government continued to soak up larger amounts of ready capital with new fits of borrowing. Millions of people suddenly faced hunger and poverty. Bread shortages, compounded by rising unemployment as the economy shut down, became common during the first half of 1788. Then in June, riots broke out across the country. The worst occurred in the town of Grenoble, where an angry crowd pried up cobblestones off the streets and pelted royal troops sent to calm the disturbance. The Day of the Tiles, as it became known, clearly demonstrated the depth of the bitterness and frustration that was becoming increasingly commonplace in France. It also

represented the first show of open defiance against the Bourbon monarchy. “You have tried to make us afraid by the marks of your power,” a Grenoble woman wrote to her king, “. . . but we will not retreat one step.”⁶

The Day of the Tiles and similar demonstrations of public anger elsewhere soon forced Louis’s hand. Nature itself added to the sense of urgency when a massive hailstorm devastated crops and killed people and livestock across northern France in July 1788. The next month, Louis recalled Jacques Necker to service. Necker had been Louis’s director of finance during better days and had proven himself to be a superior money manager. Pushed out of office in 1781 because of political intrigue and religious discrimination (Necker was a Protestant in a mostly Roman Catholic country), he was now called back to deal with a rapidly deteriorating situation. Necker quickly urged Louis to call the Estates-General, an advisory body that had not met since 1614, at the earliest possible moment. The king’s brother, among others, argued against such a move. He warned Louis that nothing less than “a revolution was being planned.”⁷ Yet despite such dire predictions, the king took Necker’s advice and set April 27 as the date for the first meeting of the Estates-General in more than 150 years. The meeting would take place at Versailles.

Widespread spring flooding, following heavy winter snows, accelerated the pace of calling the Estates together. First, a process for selecting the representatives of the Third Estate was put into place. (Separate procedures were instituted for the First and Second Estates.) It required the convening of local assemblies made up of 100 taxpaying males over the age of 25—a total of six million electors nationwide. Each local assembly would elect deputies to a larger general assembly at which delegates to the Estates-General would be chosen.

Second, and perhaps most important, the local assemblies were empowered to “draw up a list of grievances,” or *cahiers de doléances*, to be presented to the Estates-General in joint session.⁸

These grievances covered a broad array of complaints, but most demanded some sort of political, social, or economic reform. Many demanded legal equality for all of the king's subjects, the erasure of noble privileges, a weakening of Church influence in government, a sharp reduction in food prices, and general tax relief. Requests for lower taxes specifically targeted the hated salt tax, Church tithes, and the practice of tax farming. The latter two were most often attacked as establishing a society in which, as one cahier put it, "twenty million must subsist on half the wealth of France while the clergy and bloodsuckers devour the other half."⁹ One town went even further and advocated not only tax reform but also the creation of public schools.

Demands for economic change in the grievance lists were often coupled with criticisms of noble privilege. One of the privileges routinely mentioned was the keeping of animals for sport. French nobles, who were fond of hunting, stocked their private preserves with game animals such as hares and deer. This provided them with hours of entertainment, but neighboring peasant farms suffered whenever animals crossed from noble preserves onto farmland. Anger simmered in many farm villages as men sat helpless while animals, protected by royal game laws, wiped out garden plots and devoured crops in the field. When the government refused to take any action, the farmers took it upon themselves to remedy matters. As delegates to the Estates were being chosen in March 1789, France was rocked by a series of massive illegal hunts on noble property. The hunts had the dual objectives of slaughtering as many marauding rabbits, hares, deer, pheasants, and partridges as possible, while striking a symbolic blow at the lifestyle of the aristocracy. As the mass poaching grew in scope and intensity, so did the level of social violence. Gamekeepers on some manors were beaten and, in a few instances, killed by enraged farmers.

Rural unrest was matched in the cities with protests against food costs and demonstrations against wage cuts and layoffs. Paris itself witnessed some of the worst urban violence a mere

six days before the Estates-General was scheduled to open. Workers at the Réveillon wallpaper company, hearing rumors of drastic wage reductions, attacked the factory building and the company owner's home. Troops were ordered in to end the riot, leading to a street battle in which 300 workers were shot down. Three leaders of the workers' organization were executed; five others were branded and exiled to the Americas. The Réveillon riot drew the first blood of the French Revolution and triggered more violent outbursts of popular rage in other cities. In major urban centers across France, workers took to the streets, in many cases armed. A royal official at Toulon reported sustained attacks on the wealthy and the noble among the inhabitants:

ANIMAL MASSACRES

The 1789 attacks on noble game preserves were not the first in prerevolutionary France. A tradition of symbolic violence against animals had long existed. In each instance, the violence represented an indirect assault on the persons and privileges of the elite during periods of economic uncertainty and social change. During the 1730s, for example, odd episodes of cat torture occurred in Paris in which workers expressed their anger at abusive employers by putting cats on trial and then executing them. According to the historian Robert Darnton, frustrated and enraged workers found their bosses "guilty of living in luxury while [their] journeymen did all the work," and executed cats in their stead.* Fifty years later, animals would suffer and die once more as the visible symbols of wealth and inequality in France.

* Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), p. 98.

“There is open war here on landowners and property.”¹⁰ “All this makes our poor kingdom tremble,” another official lamented.¹¹

With violence erupting seemingly everywhere, the Estates-General opened at Versailles on May 5, 1789. Although the people of France were desperate for strong leadership and decisive measures, the Estates-General proved listless. The first debates moved sluggishly; after a month, the assembly was hopelessly paralyzed on key issues. Little of any substance was accomplished. “Our Estates do nothing,” a frustrated representative wrote home. “Every day we gather at nine in the morning and leave at four in the afternoon, spending our time in useless gossip.”¹² Among the workers, skepticism rose about the motives behind the stalled efforts at Versailles. A pamphlet that circulated in Paris charged an elite conspiracy among the Estates, suggesting “it seems as if everything has been done for the sake of rich men and property owners.”¹³

Matters grew worse on June 4 when, in the midst of another pointless Estates-General session and growing public impatience, Louis XVI’s eldest son died of tuberculosis. The king was inconsolable. At the precise moment that France needed the king’s full attention, Louis was distracted by this tragic loss. The delegates from the Third Estate, sensing that the king was unable to focus, let alone provide leadership in a crisis, took charge of the situation and invited any willing members of the other two Estates to join with the Third in a new National Assembly as “the only representatives [of the people] because they are sent by nearly the whole of the nation.”¹⁴ It was hoped that the National Assembly would be able to do what the king and the Estates-General could not—namely, save France from chaos and further bloodshed. Louis, still mourning the death of his son, made no move to stop the Assembly from seizing the initiative. In fact, when warned that the new body might become a competitor for power, Louis remarked simply that the “National Assembly is only a phrase.”¹⁵ The king would soon learn otherwise.



The Bastille

Together with their sympathizers in the other two Estates, the men of the Third Estate declared themselves to be the sole representatives of the French people. As yet, however, none of them had openly challenged or even seriously questioned the role and authority of the king. The new National Assembly, in fact, envisioned a future in which the representatives of the people would work with the king for the good of the whole nation. In fact, the Assembly sought a political relationship of the kind that had been established in the United States, in which the legislative and executive branches of government had been joined together by a written constitution.

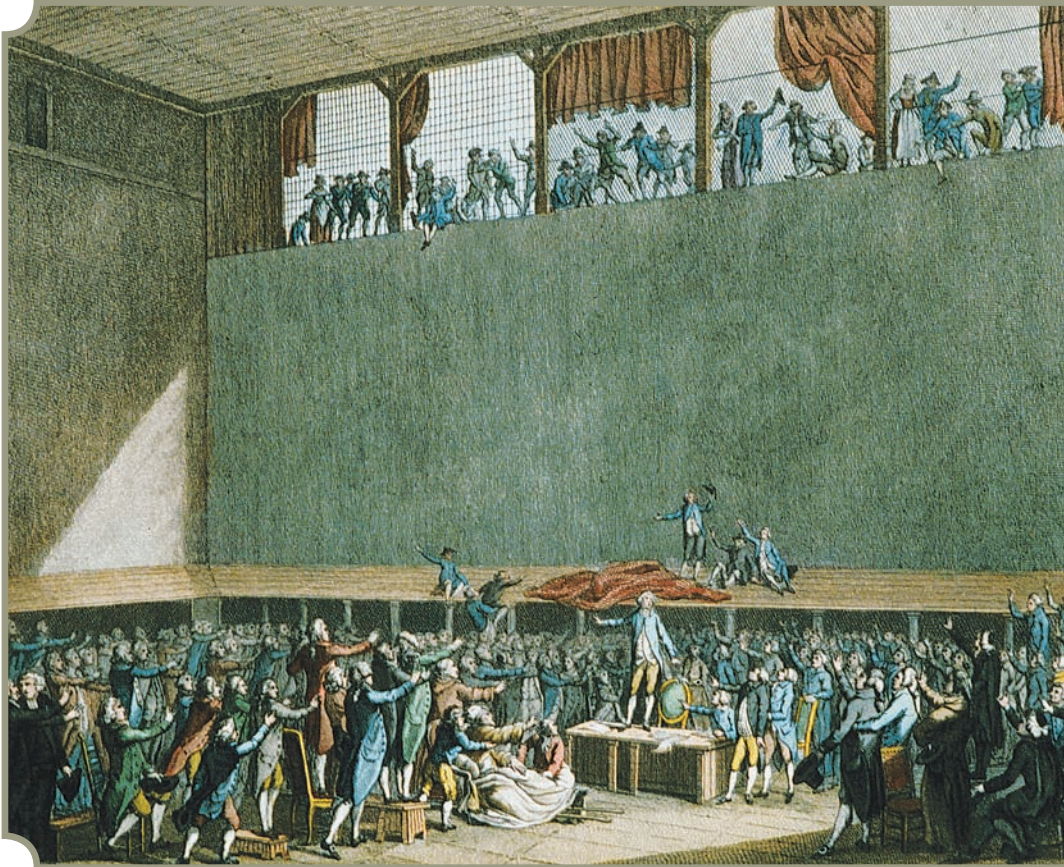
TAKING AN OATH

Sensing fundamental changes in the works, Louis decided that the time had come to address the Estates-General in person

and ordered it to be prepared to convene on June 17. In the meantime, he told work crews to equip the meeting hall properly in advance of his appearance. As part of the hurried renovation, the workers locked the doors of the building and had soldiers posted to turn away visitors. None of this was out of the ordinary, but when members of the National Assembly arrived early and found the entrance bolted and their way blocked by armed guards, they suspected the worst. The men immediately concluded that the king had attempted to bar them from coming together as a prelude to the National Assembly's suppression and their arrest. Angry and determined to meet, the Assembly adjourned to a nearby tennis court.

Once gathered at their impromptu chambers, the representatives opened a discussion over how to respond to the king's alleged efforts to snuff out the first tiny flames of liberty. Led by Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, the Roman Catholic clergyman known popularly as Abbé Sieyès, the Assembly decided that a founding document was needed to inaugurate a new political order in which the people would share power with their monarch. At the climax of the tennis court session, Sieyès called for the National Assembly to swear "to God and the *Patrie* never to be separated until we have formed a solid and equitable Constitution."¹ The next day, following the example of the reform-minded nobles who had thrown their lot in with the Third Estate, the clergy swung its support behind Sieyès and his comrades. "Gentlemen," the Church's representatives petitioned, "the majority of the order of the clergy . . . ask of you a place in the Assembly."² France, after the Tennis Court Oath, moved closer still to the establishment of a constitutional monarchy.

Having been transformed from an advisory panel into a budding legislature, the Estates-General, overshadowed by the National Assembly, held its last joint session on June 23, 1789. The attendees heard an address from Louis XVI himself on the occasion. Louis, at first, reluctantly conceded the need for



Deputies of Third Estate meet to sign the Tennis Court Oath on June 20, 1789, vowing to remain assembled until a new national constitution had been drawn up. This action was one of the first assertions of the revolutionary sovereignty of the French people against the king.

change before offering a list of minor reforms affecting the tax system and noble privileges. Then, typical of his habit of adopting half-measures, the king shied away from giving the National Assembly the authority to enact new policies. In fact, Louis ordered the Estates to adjourn and forbade them to meet together again for any reason. This reassertion of royal authority convinced the members of the National Assembly of the desperate need for a constitution to check the king's power. Four days

later, the *gardes françaises* (“French guard”) mutinied. Its leaders declared allegiance to the National Assembly and pledged not to fire upon or harm any participants in future demonstrations against the king or his government. Guns and bayonets now stood behind the National Assembly.

STORMING A PRISON

The situation in Paris soon spun out of control. With bread supplies continuing to dwindle and prices soaring, food riots erupted again in early July. Tax protests broke out at the same time. Disorder in the streets proved to be fertile soil for the growth of false rumors, some of the most dangerous and destabilizing having to do with the government’s response to the rise of the National Assembly. Word spread through the capital that the king’s finance minister, Jacques Necker, had engineered the food shortages in order to punish the common people for their support of the Assembly and its calls for constitutional reform. People talked on the street about “news” that Louis was massing troops to march against the representatives and squash their movement.

In this latter case, however, the rumors of military action proved to be rather close to the truth. Recent days had seen the arrival of nearly 20,000 fresh troops in Paris, fully one-third of whom were foreigners, mostly Germans. Word had it that Louis wanted non-French soldiers in the capital; it would make it easier for troops to fire upon Frenchmen, when given the order to do so. The build-up certainly got the attention of the National Assembly and drew howls of protest from its members. The prominent reformer Honoré Gabriel Riqueti, Comte de Mirabeau, publicly demanded that the king withdraw the soldiers from Paris. His call echoed that of the Assembly as a whole, which warned that the “presence of troops . . . may begin a horrible sequence of evils.”³ The *gardes françaises*, for its part, published a leaflet the same day pledging to resist any effort to use foreign troops to sup-

press the representatives of the French people. If this meant further mutiny, then so be it: “We are Citizens before Soldiers; Frenchmen before slaves.”⁴

Stunned by the reaction to what he saw as merely the legitimate exercise of his royal prerogative, Louis claimed that he had transferred the troops to Paris into order to protect rather than threaten the National Assembly. The king, in truth, had already decided the challenge the Assembly and was indeed planning to use the army to do it. Tensions rose and, on the night of July 12–13, riots flared over the troop deployment. Very quickly, *gardes françaises* units and angry citizens formed crowds that developed into a potent street force. Together, the people and the guardsmen crafted a cloth banner to identify themselves, blending the colors of Paris (red and blue) with the traditional white of the Bourbon monarchy. The result was a tricolor flag of red, white, and blue that would become the symbol of the revolution.

Within hours, marauding crowds of people wearing tri-color cockades (badges) descended on Paris’s gun shops, emptying them of every available weapon. Royal arsenals were next, which yielded thousands of muskets and even a few cannons to the self-proclaimed defenders of the National Assembly. Obtaining firearms was one thing; getting a hold of gunpowder, however, was quite another matter. Fearing just this kind of popular unrest, the royal government had moved most of the gunpowder in Paris to an old but still formidable prison fortress known as the Bastille. An imposing structure built in the fourteenth century, the Bastille housed, at one time or another, an array of prisoners behind its massive 4-foot-thick, 75-foot-tall (1.2-meter-thick, 22.8-meter-tall) walls. Now it also contained the gunpowder the Paris crowds needed to exercise their will.

Drawn by the Bastille’s powder stores, “citizens of every age and condition” swooped down on the prison on July 14, 1789.⁵ An initial call for surrender was rebuffed by the prison’s governor, Bernard-René de Launay, who promised



One of the major flashpoint events of the French Revolution was the storming and fall of the Bastille on July 14, 1789. In modern France, July 14 is a public holiday, formally known as the *Fête de la Fédération* (“Federation Holiday”) and is known as Bastille Day in English.

to ignite his powder supply and destroy the prison and the surrounding neighborhood if the crowd pressed any farther. “We have 20,000 pounds [9,076 kilograms] of gunpowder,” he threatened, “. . . [and] we will blow up the entire quarter and the garrison” if attacked.⁶

Undeterred, the crowd screamed for the fortress’s surrender. Finally, led by veterans of the American Revolutionary War and backed by two stolen cannons, the mob stormed the Bastille and engaged in a brief but bloody firefight with its guards. Eighty-three Parisians were killed in the exchange and another 15 mortally wounded. Seven prisoners were freed as a result of the attack, and the gunpowder stores were cap-

tured. De Launay also was taken by the crowd and marched through the streets of the city. Along the way, the unfortunate de Launay was beaten, spat upon, and humiliated. Tormented beyond his endurance, the governor begged for a quicker end. "Let me die," he cried out.⁷ The crowd obliged. De Launay was pounced upon and stabbed, hacked, and finally shot to death. The frenzied mob tore at de Launay's limp corpse until one member decapitated it with a pocketknife. The governor's head was then stuck on a pike and paraded around Paris to near universal cheers of revenge and jeers of derision. Informed of the assault and the gruesome aftermath, Louis XVI dismissed it as a minor riot, a disturbance that would lead nowhere. An aide, however, corrected the king saying, "Sire, this is not a riot; it is a revolution."⁸

THE GREAT FEAR

The day after the storming of the Bastille, Louis addressed the National Assembly, flanked by his brothers, Louis-Stanislas, Comte de Provence, and Charles-Philippe, Comte d'Artois. The king, in a subdued voice, told the representatives that he intended to withdraw the troops who caused the recent unrest from Paris. Next, in an effort at further conciliation, Louis officially acknowledged the National Assembly to be the sole representatives of the French people. Hours later, Louis and his family returned to Versailles feeling confident that matters were now closed. His royal brothers knew better, and that night "took to the road under various disguises" and fled the kingdom.⁹

While Louis relaxed at Versailles, confident that he had restored calm and order to his realm, panic swept the country. Wild rumors flowed freely from one end of France to the other: Foreign enemies were preparing to invade; royalists were plotting to attack the National Assembly and murder the representatives; wealthy merchants planned to artificially inflate bread prices and starve the masses. Nobles everywhere, it was said, were scheming to regain their grip on society. This last charge

revived ancient fears among the peasantry of noble retaliation for any hint of lower-class insubordination.

Such fears soon led to violence. Locally, groups of peasant farmers left their fields and stormed noble estates, “deaf to all but their own anger,” fully believing that the country’s elite planned to turn back the tide of resistance.¹⁰ Manor houses were ransacked and burned; their noble residents were beaten and their families terrorized. Game preserves were once again decimated by waves of poachers, who slaughtered animals in symbolic acts of mutilation aimed at noble hunters. As the violence intensified through August 1789, the trickle of noble émigrés leaving France became a torrent of panicked men,

THE DECLARATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN

In August 1789, the National Assembly proudly proclaimed *The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* as a universal expression of human freedom and dignity. The irony of presuming the term “man” to include all French regardless of gender was not lost on French women who feared that revolutionary liberty ultimately would be restricted to males. One of these women was Olympe de Gouges. As a reminder to the Assembly not to forget women as it remade France, Gouges published *The Declaration of the Rights of Women and the Female Citizen* in September 1791. In the preamble to her ironic document, de Gouges wrote:

Considering that ignorance, neglect, or contempt for the rights of woman are the sole causes of public misfortunes

women, and children fleeing their homeland with little more than their fancy titles.

The National Assembly, meanwhile, took its reform program to a truly revolutionary level for the first time. On August 4, the representatives erased all noble privileges and proclaimed that henceforth “feudal rights and duties . . . are abolished without compensation.”¹¹ A week later, the Assembly revoked all noble tax exemptions. Thus with but a few pen strokes, the National Assembly had ended centuries of noble domination in France. Louis reacted furiously. In a fit of rage, he shouted, “I will never give my sanction to the decrees that despoil [the nobility].”¹²

and governmental corruption, [the women of France] have resolved to set forth in a solemn declaration the natural, inalienable, and sacred rights of woman: so that by being constantly present to all the members of the social body this declaration may always remind them of their rights and duties; so that by being liable at every moment to comparison with the aim of any and all political institutions the acts of women’s and men’s powers may be the more fully respected; and so that by being founded henceforward on simple and incontestable principles the demands of the citizenesses may always tend toward maintaining the constitution, good morals, and the general welfare.*

For her radical efforts, de Gouges was eventually denounced as a counter-revolutionary and guillotined in 1793.

* Olympe de Gouges, “The Declaration of the Rights of Women,” *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History*, translated and edited by Lynn Hunt (Boston/New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1996), pp. 124-129.

Royal consent or no, the National Assembly continued its assault on the old order. Not content with stripping the nobles of their privileges and prestige, the Assembly issued a clear statement of what it held to be the inalienable rights of all Frenchmen: *The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*. An unequivocal expression of eighteenth-century republican thought, this declaration proposed the equality of all persons, liberty for all citizens, monarchy limited by the consent of the people's representatives, and the sovereignty of the nation and the National Assembly. More radical values and assumptions had never before been given voice in France. Many people assumed that *The Declaration of the Rights of Man* was only a prelude to what they really sought—a written constitution.

MARCHING FOR BREAD

As men in the National Assembly drafted decrees and spoke of universal rights, the women of Paris sought something more basic: bread. Through September 1789, revolutionary fervor had been growing steadily. Nothing Louis did—neither his reluctant acceptance of the August Decrees later that month nor his claim to accept the spirit of the declaration—could reduce the heat of the moment. And yet, the mixture of royal weakness and popular anger became even more combustible when the excesses of the courtiers at Versailles were stirred in. While the people of Paris suffered through a severe food shortage, Queen Marie-Antoinette and her friends threw lavish banquets at which more meat, bread, and fruit were wasted than were consumed. Drunken costume parties were commonplace. The queen's love affairs, never very well hidden, only added to the sense that the monarchy not only ignored France's miseries but also its morals, especially the morals associated with French womanhood. Hungry men and women seethed at the thought of a debauched royal court dancing, drinking, and dining, while they themselves endured the worst of times.



The Women's March on Versailles was a significant event in the French Revolution. On October 5, 1789, women from the marketplaces of Paris were near rioting over the high price and scarcity of bread and marched on the king's palace at Versailles to demand satisfaction.

Such perceptions, compounded by the chronic bread shortage and rising prices for other goods, prompted a mass reaction in October 1789. A large group of women, initially demanding bread for their families, armed itself and left Paris to deliver its grievances directly to the king at Versailles. Marching from the city, the women were joined by men of the newly constituted National Guard that had replaced the *gardes françaises* and was under the command of the formidable Marquis de Lafayette.

When the massive column reached the palace, Lafayette justified the presence of his National Guard by claiming that his intent was to ensure that a peaceful protest would remain so. He then immediately presented the crowd's demands to Louis: to allow the National Guard to take over royal security from the regular soldiers of the Flanders Regiment and the Swiss Guard; to increase bread shipments to Paris; and to have the royal family return to their palace in the capital.

When Louis took too long thinking over the proposal, the impatient and frustrated crowd broke into the palace, seeking to bring either the royal family or their blood back to Paris with it. After smashing in the front doors, women and National Guardsmen alike roamed the corridors in search of their quarry. The more they searched, the more enraged they became, reserving a special bitterness for Marie-Antoinette. One woman openly proclaimed her personal intention to “tear out [the queen's] heart . . . , cut off her head, [and] *fricasser* her liver.”¹³

Fearing for their lives, Louis's wife and children took shelter in the king's chambers, where Lafayette offered his protection. The marquis succeeded in regaining command of his men and temporarily calmed the crowd, but the peaceful interlude would not last long. Lafayette made this point to Louis as he tried to convince the king to first address the mob and then to return with it to Paris. At last, the king consented both to speak with his “good and faithful subjects” and to go back to the capital in their care.¹⁴ The women and guardsmen, in triumph, led Louis XVI, Marie-Antoinette, and their children from Versailles to the Tuileries palace as semi-captives. “Friends, we will not lack for bread in [the] future,” one of marchers exclaimed upon her return. “We are bringing you the baker and his wife.”¹⁵

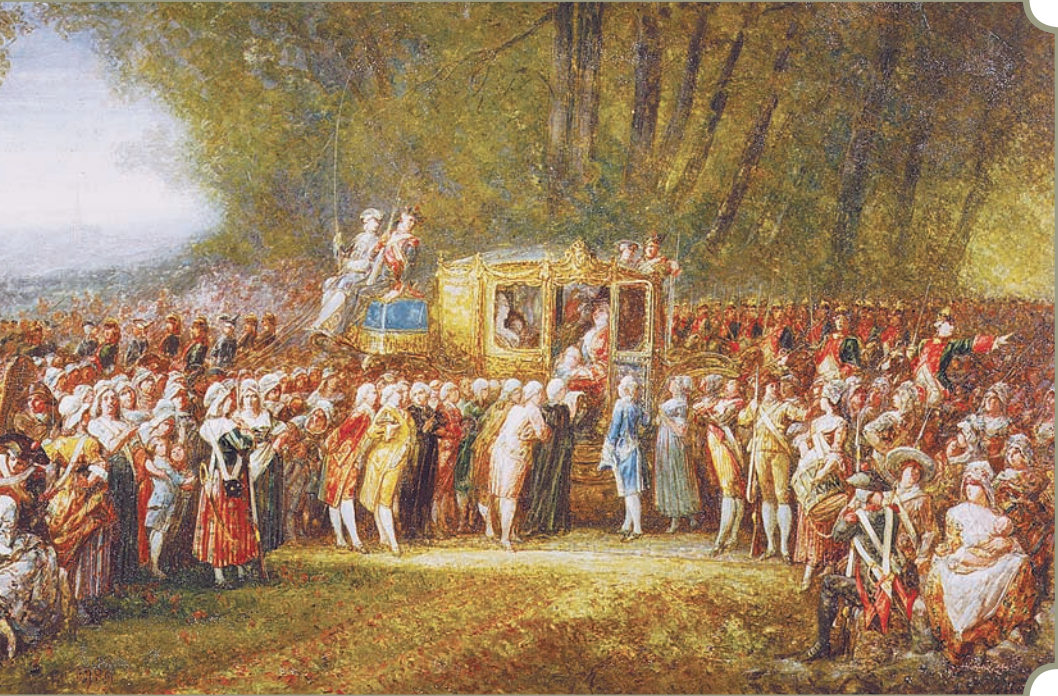


New Constitutions

The October bread march emboldened the National Assembly and encouraged its members to go forward with their increasingly radical program for political and social reform. Less than a week after Louis returned to Paris, his royal prerogatives shattered, the Assembly moved to confront the nation's single most powerful institution—the Roman Catholic Church. In doing so, the representatives initiated a revolutionary process that ultimately would lead to the deaths of thousands of Frenchmen and Frenchwomen, beginning with Louis XVI himself.

THE CHURCH UNDER SIEGE

It was ironic that the frontal assault on the power of the Church should be proposed by one clergyman and seconded



Once Parisians brought King Louis XVI to Paris from Versailles in October 1789, his powers as sovereign were considerably weakened. At the same time, the National Assembly was emboldened to take action against another of its perceived enemies: the Roman Catholic Church.

by another. On October 13, Charles Maurice de Talleyrand, bishop of Autun, asked the Assembly to consider nationalizing Church property in order to stave off the bankruptcy of the French state. Another churchman, Abbé Guillaume Raynal, seconded his motion. “The State,” Raynal argued, “is not made for religion, but religion made for the state.”¹ In short order, the Assembly began debating whether to confiscate Church property in the short term and the extent to which the Church should be subordinated to the national government in the long term.

As the representatives talked, the issue of Church-state relations grew more contentious. Many called for a program of

nationalization of Church property that left the clergy's role in French politics and society as it was. Some, however, wanted nationalization to be merely the first in a series of sweeping changes aimed at breaking the power of the Church. In the end, the former group prevailed. On November 2, the Assembly passed, by a vote of 510–346, a resolution to nationalize and subsequently sell Church property. Actual land sales were scheduled to begin in December, with the proceeds going to the national treasury.

Once the sales began in earnest, the National Assembly took the next step of reconfiguring the geographic and political maps of France to match the reality of new property lines. In March 1790, the representatives dismantled the system of royal provinces, transforming them into national departments. Eighty-three in number, the departments would be administered by locally elected officials who would be answerable to the Assembly. To provide for the necessary elections, the representatives created a new electorate: Every taxpaying male over 25 years of age—more than two-thirds of the men in France—was now granted the right to vote for lower-ranking departmental officials. Electors who had been chosen by the voters would then choose upper-level administrators.

Driven on by the intoxicating nature of radical change, the Assembly turned its attention once more to the nobility. Having earlier stripped the aristocracy of its feudal rights and privileges, the National Assembly erased all noble titles, family coats of arms, liveries, and personal names based on place of origin in June 1790. The days when common French people referred to their social superiors as the duke of this or the baron of that were ended. “There are to be no longer any nobility . . . which shall suppose . . . distinction of birth,” the Assembly declared.² In effect, the Second Estate was all but abolished. For the first time in centuries, France had neither lords nor ladies, only equal subjects before the king and equal citizens before the National Assembly.

The representatives, however, were not finished with the Catholic Church. As the summer days grew longer and hotter, the National Assembly began drafting a document that would definitively end the Church's political influence. As one of the more radical deputies put it, "the clergy exists by virtue of the nation, so the nation can destroy it."³ With that goal in mind, the representatives drafted and quickly approved the Civil Constitution of the Clergy in July. The provisions of the constitution altered fundamentally both the form and the function of the Catholic Church in France. Clergy at the local level would now become public officials paid by the state for their services. All unsold Church property was immediately sequestered, including buildings and religious objects. Most disturbing from the clergy's perspective was a provision that required every priest and bishop to swear an oath "to be faithful to the nation, the law, and the king."⁴

The oath was set to be administered across France on November 27, 1790. Every clergyman who took the oath that day would have until January 3, 1791, to register as a so-called juror, or constitutional priest. Any who refused to do so would be designated as nonjuring priests and be granted a one-year grace period. After that, they would be declared enemies of the state and would become subject to arrest and even possible deportation abroad.

Soon after the constitution's passage, editorials in Paris newspapers rejoiced that the power of the Church had been broken, but outside of the capital, criticism of the new measures was immediate and widespread, especially in the rural departments. While priests in Paris embraced the Civil Constitution, their colleagues in the outlying areas openly rejected the National Assembly's orders. In the Vendée, for example, out of 333 parish priests, only 112 took the oath in November. The department of Provence counted just one in five priests swearing loyalty to the state. The departments north of Paris saw an even lower percentage of compliance, a bit more than 10 percent.

THE KING FLEES

Many French priests dismissed the Civil Constitution of the Clergy as an insult not only to the clergy, but also to God. Louis XVI, forced to attend the Assembly session where the document was passed, understood the constitution to be a challenge to the very foundation of the social order over which he presided. The anniversary celebration of the fall of the Bastille confirmed the king's fears that his royal power would disappear as quickly as the Church's. Held just outside Paris two days after the Civil Constitution was enacted, the celebration drew a crowd of some 50,000 people despite a pouring rain. After a long sermon by Talleyrand, delivered under wet but still gently fluttering banners proclaiming equality and justice for all, Louis addressed the gathering as the king of the French rather than the king of France, a slight but significant title change foisted upon him by the Assembly. Reluctantly, Louis promised the cheering masses that he would henceforth "employ all the power delegated to me by the constitution to uphold the decrees of the National Assembly."⁵ In truth, he had no intention of doing anything of the sort.

Publicly, the king accepted everything the National Assembly had done: the August Decrees, *The Declaration of the Rights of Man*, the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, even the first issuance of paper money as legal tender—the *assignats*—in April 1790. Privately, however, Louis boiled over with resentment. Encouraged by a spiteful Marie-Antoinette, the king considered offering covert support to counterrevolutionary elements inside France and opened communications with Austria in the hope that the monarchy there might provide him with assistance should he need to confront the Assembly more forcefully.

Popular distrust of the king and his wife grew at the very moment that Louis began to see the people's representatives as competitors, if not outright enemies. As criticism of the royal couple became commonplace, many French openly questioned the need for the monarchy at all. Before long, Louis and Marie-

Antoinette decided that Paris was no longer safe. On April 18, 1791, claiming to be seeking a holiday respite from the pressures of government, Louis and his family tried to leave the capital for the town of Saint-Cloud. His real intention was to flee to Austria and begin the process of destroying the National Assembly. News of the departure had leaked out, however, and the king quickly found his chosen route of escape blocked by an angry mob that turned the royal carriages around. Now back at the Tuileries palace as prisoners, the king and queen remained undeterred. They continued to plot an escape but now with even greater determination. “The events which have just occurred,” Marie-Antoinette declared, “give added purpose to our plans.”⁶

The next two months passed slowly for the royal couple. Finally, on June 20, they put their plans into action. In disguise, Louis and his family left Paris in the middle of the night, determined to reach Austria and take refuge there. Stopped at the border town of Varennes, the king was recognized by a local postmaster and interrogated. Exhausted by the questioning and sensing the futility of further denial, Louis at last admitted, “I am indeed your king.”⁷ At the news of the aborted flight and Louis’s capture, Paris erupted in anti-Bourbon anger. Bourbon symbols and monuments were vandalized; Marie-Antoinette was publicly insulted, being called a witch and a she-devil. A newspaper summed up the popular sentiment at the time by describing the caravan of royal coaches forced back to Paris as being “the prison convoy of the monarchy!”⁸

The National Assembly, for its part, simply stated that the king’s actions had crippled his authority and legitimacy: “[T]here is no longer a king in France.”⁹ The American revolutionary and author Thomas Paine, now sitting as a representative of the French people, went so far as to refer to Louis XVI by his family name in his denunciation of the Varennes episode, calling the king Louis Capet. Implicating the Marquis de Lafayette in the affair, a small, somber, impeccably well-dressed



During the French Revolution, even someone with impeccable revolutionary credentials, like the Marquis de Lafayette (*above*), was perceived as a threat. In fact, Maximilien Robespierre, head of the radicals in the National Assembly, threatened to behead him.

representative from Arras issued perhaps the most chilling statement of the day. If any evidence of Lafayette's involvement were discovered, he assured the general, "You, [Monsieur] Lafayette, will answer to the assembly on the fate of the king with your head."¹⁰ The man making the threat was named Maximilien Robespierre.

Beyond the confines of the National Assembly, calls for radical action in response to the king's flight grew throughout the late summer of 1791. Radical clubs such as the newly formed Jacobins, led by Robespierre, and Georges-Jacques Danton's Cordeliers demanded immediate abdication as the only proper response. "Louis [has] abdicated the throne," a Cordeliers pamphlet alleged. "From now on Louis is nothing to us, unless he becomes our enemy."¹¹ Newspapers such as *L'Ami du peuple* ("The Friend of the People"), edited by the fiery radical Jean-Paul Marat, echoed these demands for abdication and went further to advocate an end to the monarchy itself.

Understanding that the Varennes flight had changed the political landscape dramatically, the National Assembly redoubled its efforts to fulfill the pledge taken at the tennis court in 1789 and draft a written constitution for France. The document that eventually took shape compiled all the previous work done by the Assembly and sharply limited the power of the king and his role in French society. No longer a monarch, the new constitution designated Louis XVI as the "hereditary representative" of France, thus putting the people's representatives on a par with the king.¹² After some minor debates, the constitution was passed on September 13, 1791. Louis was given no choice but to accept it, and he did. Marie-Antoinette was more defiant; she dismissed the Constitution of 1791 as "a tissue of impracticable absurdities."¹³

A NEW ASSEMBLY

Having completed the task begun more than two years earlier, the National Assembly dissolved itself after the recently enfran-

chised French electorate chose deputies to a new Legislative Assembly that convened in October 1791. Although sneered at by Marie-Antoinette as “a pile of rogues, madmen, and beasts” from whom nothing could be gained, the deputies set an ambitious agenda for themselves.¹⁴ Among the Legislative Assembly’s top priorities were penalizing nonjuring priests, whose grace periods would soon expire; guarding against counter-revolutionary intrigue; dealing with the problematic social status of noble émigrés; and preparing for a possible war with Austria and Prussia—two kingdoms, hostile to the revolutionaries, with whom Marie-Antoinette and Louis were already in secret contact.

Although the royal couple’s intrigues with Austria and Prussia were merely suspected by the revolutionaries at this time, the very real dangers of counterrevolution and foreign intervention were soon confirmed. Thousands of French nobles had fled their homeland and taken refuge in Austria, where they were urging the Austrians to invade France. Fully aware of this fact, the Assembly ordered everyone who had left France since the fall of the Bastille to return immediately and profess their loyalty. “French citizens gathered together beyond the kingdom’s frontiers,” a new émigré law read, “are henceforth declared to be suspect of conspiracy against their native land” unless they came home.¹⁵ The law was later expanded to include the death penalty for anyone remaining abroad after January 1, 1792. Meanwhile, a domestic surveillance committee was established to monitor political activity for any sign of foreign espionage or counterrevolutionary plots.

The Legislative Assembly’s fears were justified. By January 1792, Louis had long since joined his wife in her scheme for counterrevolution involving both Austria and a secret network of émigré subversives run by one of the king’s brothers. The Assembly’s troubles did not end there, however. The open assault on the Catholic Church initiated by the National Assembly had alienated many people in the more

conservative rural departments of France. Mass emigration of wealthy nobles, moreover, had disrupted rural social structures and had inadvertently drained local economies of capital. Ill-conceived government efforts to stabilize prices and increase food supplies had instead generated food shortages and rampant inflation. The result of all this was growing bitterness and resentment toward Paris, especially in Brittany, Normandy, and the areas south of the Loire River. There, hunger grew, first in the countryside and in the cities. Orders from the central government, after being first ignored, were soon openly defied by famished and frightened people.

The revolutionary government's enemies—émigrés in particular—found encouragement in the increasingly bleak situation faced by the Legislative Assembly. Feeling that the moment had arrived for counterrevolution, those émigrés who had gone to Austria formed themselves into an army “composed of nobles . . . united in the same cause” and then offered their swords in the service of the Emperor Leopold II of Austria.¹⁶ Shortly afterward, in February 1792, Austria and Prussia entered into a formal alliance dedicated to the destruction of the French Revolution and the restoration of Louis XVI to the throne. Marie-Antoinette responded by expanding her correspondences to include the transmission of vital military secrets. Both the queen and king went to great lengths to share with their new allies intelligence about the French Army's strengths and weaknesses.

Unaware of the new activities going on in the chambers of the Tuileries, the Legislative Assembly debated how best to respond to the latest threat to the revolution's survival. Ultimately, the deputies decided to take preemptive action. With the full support of the radical Jacobins and Cordeliers and a new moderate faction known as the Girondins, the Assembly leadership proclaimed “a crusade for universal liberty” and declared war on Austria and Prussia.¹⁷ On April 20, 1792, Louis XVI, as the king, was forced to read aloud to the Assembly a

war declaration that was greeted with relief by the deputies in the audience. Accounts could finally be settled with the Austrian and Prussian monarchists and the émigré counter-revolutionaries at the same time.

The first of what would come to be called the Wars of the French Revolution quickly turned against France. The French armies suffered a series of early and significant defeats at the hands of superior Austrian and Prussian forces. By the end of May, the military situation had deteriorated to the point

FRANCE AND ITS ENEMIES COMPARED



The armies of France were at a distinct disadvantage as they went to war in 1792. Already exhausted by the American war, the French Army had been further weakened by the exodus of experienced officers. The Bourbon officer corps had been dominated by the nobility; as nobles fled France so the ranks of line officers were decimated, thus leaving the army virtually leaderless at most levels. The Austrian and Prussian armies, by contrast, retained experienced officers of every grade, most importantly in regimental and general command. In terms of sheer size, the combined numbers of their Austrian-Prussian opponents dwarfed the revolutionary French Army. France, in 1792, was capable of fielding approximately 180,000 men; roughly more than double that number opposed them. The Austrians and Prussians, moreover, had superior numbers of cavalry and artillery and better transport capabilities. The fact that the French suffered so many early losses comes as no surprise given the odds against them at the time.

of imminent French collapse. Lafayette and Jean-Baptiste Vimeur, Comte de Rochambeau, both veterans of the American Revolutionary War and now in command of the two primary French armies, recommended that the Assembly sue for peace. The radical deputies, however, were far from convinced of the hopelessness of matter in the field. In fact, they accused the generals of harboring defeatist sentiments at best, treasonous intentions at worst. "I do not trust the generals," Robespierre told his colleagues. "Most of them are nostalgic for the old order."¹⁸

The issue of defeatism soon proved to be irrelevant. French losses continued to mount throughout the spring of 1792. In June, Rochambeau resigned in frustration. Lafayette continued to serve, but his power and influence were rapidly waning. Talk of his impeachment and removal from command circulated freely in the Assembly. The general tenor of conversation among the deputies favored an immediate correction in the course of the war and the revolution. New voices were being raised in support of further radicalization and innovation in government and on the battlefield—and the new men rising to power would bring such change and much more to France.



To Kill a King

The revolutionary storm that had been gathering since the fall of the Bastille finally broke in 1792. Public sentiment had turned sharply against the monarchy in the wake of Louis's failed attempt to flee France. Energized by a new sense of empowerment, a crowd stormed the Tuileries on June 20, demanding an audience with the king. After some words of advice from his aides, Louis consented and met with his embittered subjects. To the king's surprise, he was immediately surrounded and set upon by the mob. "Monsieur, you must hear us," its leader proclaimed loudly. "You are a villain. . . . The people are tired of this play-acting."¹ Having encircled Louis, the mob began to mock him. Soon, one of them emerged carrying a red liberty cap in his hand. A palace guard quickly moved to block the man, but Louis intervened: "Let him do what he wants; he will offer me some rudeness,

what of it?”² Freed now from restraint, the crowd forced the king not only to wear the bonnet but also to drink several toasts to the French people. Now publicly humiliated, Louis XVI had reached the limit of his power to influence the course of the revolution in France.

THE RISE OF THE ASSEMBLY AND THE FALL OF THE KING

On July 31, 1792, one of the more radical sections of the city of Paris issued an address to the people of France and their representatives in the Legislative Assembly. “For too long a despicable tyrant has played with our destinies,” it read. “Let us all unite to declare the fall of this cruel king, let us say with one accord, Louis XVI is no longer the king of the French.”³

Three days later, Parisians awoke to find themselves and their city condemned to destruction if they moved against the Bourbon monarch. The commander of the Prussian Army, Charles William Ferdinand, Duke of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel, had issued a proclamation that made public his intention to punish the French for their insult to royal authority and legitimacy. The duke sentenced the “city of Paris and all its inhabitants . . . to military execution and total destruction” unless the king was immediately restored to his former place and prerogative.⁴

The response to Brunswick’s threat was virtually unanimous—and defiant. All 48 Paris sections, except one, demanded Louis’s abdication and a redoubling of the war effort. The sections’ spirits were lifted and their call for abdication was given renewed weight by the recent arrival in the capital of radical volunteers from Marseille bound for the front. Marching into Paris, the soldiers sang loudly the patriotic revolutionary song “La Marseillaise,” the words to which called the people “To arms! . . . So impure blood may water our soil!”⁵ This call for violence was echoed over the following days in the streets and in newspapers such as Marat’s *L’Ami du peuple*.

The violence was realized on August 10. That day, leaders in Paris declared the city to be an independent commune and called for the abolition of the Bourbon monarchy. Led by sympathetic National Guardsmen, now utterly beyond Lafayette's control, a crowd descended on the Tuileries palace. Terrified, the king and his family barricaded themselves in their chambers. Neither locked doors nor the presence of the Swiss Guard, however, could deter an infuriated mob determined "to attack the palace; exterminate everybody [and] force the king to abdicate."⁶ The crowd burst into the ornate halls and sitting rooms of the palace and overpowered the king's guards, brutally slaying several hundred of them and then systematically hunting down any survivors. In the end, 600 men of the Swiss Guard were slaughtered, their bodies stripped and horribly mutilated.

During the killing spree, Louis and his family escaped a similar fate only by slipping away and seeking refuge with the Legislative Assembly. The Swedish ambassador summed up the events of August 10 by writing that nothing could "describe the horror of yesterday. . . . For the moment the king has been divested of all his functions."⁷ Robespierre, feeling that something momentous had taken place, took a different view of the carnage. Gloating over the king's misfortune and animated by the sudden burst of radical energy, he saw the bloodshed as the hallmark of "the most beautiful revolution that has ever honored humanity."⁸

A fresh course for the French Revolution had now been set, and Louis XVI's days were numbered. Disgusted by the patriotic fury of the August 10 mob and abandoned by the National Guard that he himself created, Lafayette decided that "nothing was left for me but to leave France."⁹ The general then quietly crossed the front lines and fled to Austria. He was duly questioned and was made Austria's most prominent prisoner of war. Days later, the invading army plunged into the French heartland, the duke more convinced than ever that "the French need a lesson which they will never forget."¹⁰

News of the Prussian advance sent the Legislative Assembly and the whole of Paris into sheer panic. Led by Georges-Jacques Danton, a new committee of surveillance was set up to seek out traitors, spies, saboteurs, and other enemies of France likely to aid Brunswick. Over the course of the next few weeks, the committee conducted sweeps that netted more than 1,000 suspects, including nonjuring priests and friends of the royal family. In support of the committee's raids, Marat told Parisians that they were in danger of being betrayed by hidden foes; but not to worry, Danton's patrols "will flush out the traitors by fear."¹¹

MASSACRES IN SEPTEMBER

By September 1792, the pressures of war and widespread fear of subversion led one pamphleteer to conclude that "France has become a volcano."¹² Then came news that the strategic fortress of Verdun had fallen to the Austrians. Paranoia now gave way to bloody excess. Convinced that the suspects taken into custody by Danton had been actively aiding the enemy and undermining the security of Paris, radicals in the Assembly called for the prisoners' immediate execution. "Give me three thousand heads," Marat bellowed, "and I will guarantee that the country is saved."¹³ The newspaper *The People's Orator* similarly demanded blood to save the nation. "The prisons are full of conspirators," the paper's editors wrote. "See how we judge them."¹⁴ Goaded into action by such reckless commentary, the people acted. Mobs formed yet again.

On September 2, the first batch of prisoners, 19 nonjuring priests, were dragged from their cells and hacked, stabbed, and sawn to death. Another 150 priests were executed shortly afterward, although some of these men were mercifully shot. Waves of killings followed, each one dutifully approved by ad hoc, or impromptu, three-man tribunals, holding open-air trials complete with jeering crowds eagerly anticipating the court's sentences. In front of these audiences, the judges ques-

tioned prisoners, quickly found them guilty, and invariably condemned them to death, regardless of how passionately they begged for mercy. “No plea can save the designated victims,” an observer at one trial wrote.¹⁵ Even one of Marie-Antoinette’s ladies-in-waiting fell to the rampaging crowds. Convicted of little more than her association with the queen, the young woman was slain and her lifeless body decapitated. The gore-caked head was then put on a stick and paraded to the prison where the royal family had been held since August. Once there, a member of the cheering mob shoved the gruesome trophy into an open window in Marie-Antoinette’s room and instructed the shrieking queen to consider carefully “how the people avenge themselves on tyrants.”¹⁶

As the fury in Paris ebbed, the bodies of the slain were stripped, dragged outside the city limits, and buried unceremoniously in lime pits. Their blood-soaked clothes were sold to the highest bidder. The few survivors, mostly women found innocent of any political offenses, were placed into protective custody by suddenly lenient tribunals. The death toll from the massacres in September, according to prison records, was 1,614. Madame Roland, the wife of the minister of justice and an early supporter of the radical cause, was sickened by the carnage. “The Revolution has become repugnant to me,” she said.¹⁷ As with many others in France, Roland’s hopes for an orderly and bloodless revolution had evaporated.

A DEATH SENTENCE FOR LOUIS

As bodies were being thrown into pits on the outskirts of Paris, the Legislative Assembly was busily moving toward its own dissolution. Convinced that the Constitution of 1791 no longer served or suited the revolution, the Assembly called for and held elections for a new National Convention, which took up its duties on September 20 in an old racetrack next to the Tuileries palace. It was there, sitting on uncomfortable wooden benches, that the deputies learned that the French Army had

finally had a major success—it defeated the Prussians at Valmy. The Prussians had anticipated an easy victory over a revolutionary force that émigrés had reported to be a mere “collection of riff-raff.”¹⁸ The outcome of the engagement thus stunned them as much as it heartened the French people and the National Convention. The National Convention, in particular, was in such radical jubilation that it summarily abolished the monarchy and declared the creation of the French Republic in its place. The lack of a constitution for this new republic was no obstacle; the Convention would rule by decree until a founding document could be written.

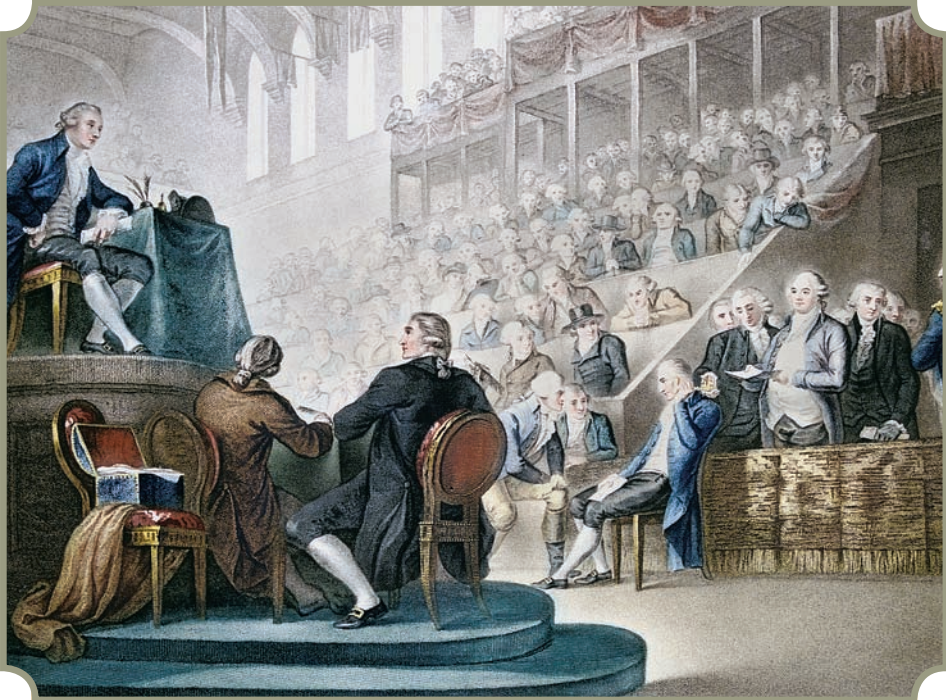
Yet once the celebratory cheers died down, fresh divisions began to appear. Identified by their seating arrangements in the meeting hall, factions emerged in the National Convention. Occupying the highest seats in the assembly room, the Montagnards represented the most radical voices in the Convention. Below them sat the Girondins, moderates from the Gironde department of France. The Plain faction—so-called because its members’ chairs sat on the floor of the Convention—functioned as a midpoint between the radicals and moderates, sometimes leaning toward Montagnard positions, sometimes inclined toward the Girondins.

Of the many issues that divided the Convention factions, none was more hotly contested than the fate of Louis XVI. The Montagnards, led by Robespierre, sought an immediate decision on what to do with a king who now had no kingdom, while the Girondins favored postponing any action until after the war had been decided. The Girondins, in this rare instance, prevailed, but the delay they advocated lasted barely two months. By November 1792, the republican armies had gone on the offensive and had scored a series of stunning victories, pushing the Austrians and Prussians out of French territory and invading what are today Belgium and the Netherlands in the north and the Rhineland and parts of Switzerland in the east and south.

With such gains in hand, the Montagnards pressured the Convention to move against the former monarch. Just at that moment, however, a new obstacle appeared, this one legal. According to the Constitution of 1791, which was still in effect, Louis's person and position were inviolable. A special committee established by the Convention confirmed that Louis was protected from any sort of impeachment or trial by law. By now, though, even the most reluctant deputies felt that the time had come to erase the last vestiges of monarchy in France. As a Plain member put it, "To declare the king inviolable when he has violated everything . . . is not only to outrage nature but also the constitution."¹⁹ The Montagnard deputy and fiercely radical Louis-Antoine de Saint-Just went further. He rejected all restraint, demanding Louis's execution without trial or any other further delay.

As the deputies considered Louis's fate, chance dealt the ill-fated king the death card. On November 19, the Convention learned that a hidden cache of secret documents had been discovered behind an armoire in the Tuileries palace. These papers included letters that incriminated Louis and Marie-Antoinette in an émigré conspiracy to deliver France into the hands of its enemies. When the Convention opened its December 4 session, the first item on the agenda was a motion made and carried to put Louis on trial for conspiracy and treason. The only objections, ironically, came from Robespierre and Saint-Just. They challenged the very idea that the Convention would judge Louis as it would any other citizen of the Republic. Both men instead urged that the former king be executed without trial.

Now an enemy of the state, Louis was reduced to the status of political criminal. The king, therefore, was taken from his family and placed into a separate cell in the Temple prison. He was forbidden to wear any royal clothing or ornaments and was even briefly denied the use of a razor for fear that he might commit suicide. Both the king and his queen were subjected



The former French king, Louis XVI, is seen here being put on trial by the National Convention in December 1792. According to reports, after the president of the convention asked Louis if he had anything to say in his own defense, the former monarch spoke briefly and with great dignity.

routinely to the taunts and insults of their jailors, with Marie-Antoinette the target of lewd comments that made reference to everything from her appearance to her Austrian pedigree.

Louis's torment was relieved only by a summons from the Convention to appear before it on December 11, along with his government-appointed lawyer. Addressed by the president of the Convention as Louis Capet, the king responded softly that his "ancestors had that name, but I have never been called that."²⁰ Ignoring the correction, the Convention president continued: "Louis, the French people accuse you of having committed a multitude of crimes in order to establish your tyranny through the destruction of liberty."²¹ Louis quickly denied all of

the charges against him, including plotting against France and willfully shedding the innocent blood of his subjects, before being returned to the Temple to await trial.

“Citizen Capet,” as he was now called, sat forlornly in his cell until December 26, when he was once again summoned before the Convention. Judgment upon him was swift. The evidence against him was conclusive, Louis was told. His trial was brief; there was little doubt about the outcome. Deliberation on both verdict and sentence began on January 4, 1793, and ended 11 days later, when Louis was found guilty on all counts. The next day, 363 out of 721 deputies approved the death penalty after a 13-hour roll-call vote. Execution was set for January 21.

Told of the sentence by his lawyer, Louis calmly made two final requests: to see a priest and to be allowed a final visit with his family. Both were granted. Reunited with Marie-Antoinette and his children on the night of January 20, Louis spent more than an hour saying his goodbyes. At the meeting’s conclusion, the king’s son, in tears, grabbed his father’s legs in an effort to delay the inevitable. At six o’clock the next morning, Louis’s other request was fulfilled. Awakened by his guards, the doomed king was greeted by a priest, to whom he made his last confession and from whom he received the Eucharist. Louis then removed his Bourbon signet ring and asked that it be given to his son. He then turned to the guards and said politely, “Let’s go.”²²

Led from his cell at 8 A.M., Louis was driven through Paris in a closed carriage, bound for the Place de la Revolution, under tight security. All windows along the route were closed and shuttered on the orders of the Convention. After a two-hour journey, during which a comically ill-conceived rescue attempt was foiled, the carriage arrived at its grim destination. A crowd of 80,000 Parisians had gathered in the plaza, at the center of which stood an empty pedestal that once held a statue of Louis’s grandfather, Louis XV.

Taken to the scaffold, Louis faced an innovative and recently adopted tool for capital punishment, the guillotine. Holding

the release for the device's glistening blade was Charles Henri Sanson, the state executioner. Sanson, without a word, removed Louis's shirt, cut his hair, and bound his hands, all to the delight of the crowd. Attempting a final statement, Louis shouted, "I die innocent of all crimes of which I have been charged. . . ." ²³

THE "MERCIFUL" GUILLOTINE

Incredible though it may sound, the guillotine was developed in order to provide governments with a humane tool for carrying out capital punishment. Although invented in Germany, a deputy in the National Assembly named Dr. Joseph-Ignace Guillotin championed the device in France. Guillotin, who later recoiled at the common use of his name in reference to a machine that was once known as the Scottish Maiden, objected to other forms of execution then current in France as being barbaric. Guillotin recommended to the Assembly that it adopt a more scientific and modern way to kill people. Jean-Paul Marat and other leading radicals supported him in his campaign. According to Guillotin, hanging was too slow, beheading with an ax was too painful, and breaking on the wheel (a process whereby a person was tied to a wagon wheel and then had every bone in their body systematically broken) was too gruesome. The "mechanism," as he called it, on the other hand, "falls like thunder, the head flies off, the blood spurts, the man is no more." ^{*} What others would later consider an artifact of barbarism in its own right was deemed by its promoter and namesake to be the epitome of modernity and mercy.

^{*} Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), p. 621.



The execution of Louis XVI on January 21, 1793, was a major turning point in the French Revolution. Other monarchs in Europe saw the king's trial and execution by French revolutionaries as a threat to their own regimes.

The rest of his words were drowned out by a drum roll. Louis XVI, denied his message to posterity, was strapped to the loading plank, tilted into position under the guillotine's cold blade, and the release was pulled. Louis's head fell away from his body at precisely 10:15 A.M. and dropped into a wicker basket from which Sanson promptly lifted it for public display. As the onetime king of France's blood flowed across the scaffold, the executioner cut locks of hair from the severed head and sold them on the spot as souvenirs. The monarchy had ended. The future belonged to the Republic—and to Robespierre.



The Road to Terror

Very early in their tenure, the deputies of the National Convention began to view the expansion of revolutionary freedom abroad to be the surest way of protecting it at home. On February 1, 1793, therefore, the Convention declared war on Great Britain and the Dutch Republic. Within a month, a standing French Army made up of regulars and volunteers was augmented by conscripts called into service by a February 27 levy, or draft, of 300,000 men. More aggressive and determined than either of its predecessors, the National Convention committed the nation to a war that it saw as being a continental struggle for the survival of the French Revolution. The War of the First Coalition, as it came to be known, pushed the revolution into a new phase of consolidation and radicalization.

THE RISE OF ROBESPIERRE

The violence and bloodshed of war provided the backdrop for the ascendancy of the fastidious, shy Maximilien Robespierre to the pinnacle of revolutionary power. Born in 1758, Robespierre was known best for his soft, high-pitched voice and his tendency toward modest dress. He was said to have possessed only two suits, both black, which he kept impeccably clean. Robespierre's cleanliness extended to his personal affairs. His honesty and integrity were beyond reproach. In fact, Robespierre was so honest that he earned the nickname "The Incorruptible." Even more than his physical appearance or conduct, though, Robespierre was renowned for his ideological rigidity and his public speaking. A convinced republican, Robespierre saw no middle ground between liberty and tyranny. In any nation, he argued, there "must be a single will. It must be either republican or royalist."¹ In the more than 150 speeches he delivered before the National Assembly between May 1789 and September 1791, Robespierre made his revolutionary case for radical change again and again with a force of logic and a passion few could resist. Now a deputy in the National Convention alongside fellow radicals Jean-Paul Marat and Georges-Jacques Danton, Robespierre was well positioned to turn his words into action. All he needed was the right opportunity to take control of the Convention and, through it, the French Republic. Robespierre could then finally implement a program he had long imagined, aimed at purifying the revolution and safeguarding liberty. The multiple crises of 1793 provided him with just such an opening.

WAR IN THE VENDÉE

January 1793 witnessed not only the execution of Louis XVI but also a rate of price inflation never experienced before in France. Prices for basic commodities rose sharply because of the political uncertainty after Louis's beheading and the pressures of feeding a nation at war. The cost of staples such as



Maximilien Robespierre was one of the most influential figures in the radical phase of the French Revolution. He was instrumental in the implementation of the Reign of Terror, in which tens of thousands of citizens were put to death as “enemies of the revolution.”

sugar, coffee, and, most important, bread, had begun to bear down heavily on the average citizen. The Convention's reluctance to institute even partial price controls only made matters worse. Food riots soon erupted in Paris as the assignat fell to one half of its face value. The unrest quickly spread, threatening to undermine the Convention's authority nationwide.

In a frantic effort to reassert their control, the deputies dispatched special representatives-on-mission to the departments. Given full executive powers, the representatives were ordered to defend against popular actions that the Convention interpreted as challenges to the revolution itself. On March 9, Jean-Baptiste Carrier, the representative-on-mission for the Vendée in Nantes, confirmed the Convention's worst fears of counter-revolution in that region. He recommended that Paris move swiftly to root out and punish the culprits. Carrier advised the creation of "an extraordinary criminal tribunal" to stamp out resistance to the Convention's power.² The product of Carrier's suggestion was a national Revolutionary Tribunal "concerned with all counter-revolutionary activity," made up of five judges in Paris.³ Twelve jurors assisted the judges in their tasks, and a state prosecutor was empowered to charge and bring to trial those accused of crimes against France and the revolution.

The Revolutionary Tribunal was complemented by a special committee established to oversee police activity and investigations. Called the Committee of General Security, it operated nationally through local surveillance committees, given the rather vague job of working "to discover and prevent evil."⁴ By redefining unrest over a faltering economy as a political crime, the Convention repackaged its problems in a manner that made them far more manageable. The next logical step was the creation of permanent suspect groups that could be easily blamed for this or that disturbance. The clergy and nobility—already presumed to be inherently counterrevolutionary elements—headed the enemies' list but were soon joined by a wide array of people, including writers and journalists. Indeed, some of

the crimes specifically named as being most dangerous to state security were defamation of the Convention and advocating for the restoration of the monarchy.

With novel crimes and associated criminals in place, the Convention used its representatives-on-mission to tighten its grip on France. Aggressive centralization of power, however, when combined with flawed economic policies, mandatory military service, and persecution of the clergy, pushed the rural citizenry beyond the limits of its endurance. By the end of March 1793, an armed uprising had begun in the Vendée, where the peasantry “showed themselves to be uniformly discontented with the new order of things.”⁵ Within a month, isolated bands of rebels had formed themselves into the Grand Royal and Catholic Army and had begun a campaign of irregular warfare against the Republic. Engaged in what was termed a *petite guerre* (“little war”), the Vendéan fighters were soon being called *guerrillas*.

Throughout the spring, the Vendéan guerrillas conducted hit-and-run attacks against government troops wherever and whenever they encountered them. Vendéan fighters routinely ambushed the “Blues”—as republican soldiers were called—and assassinated local officials and other collaborators. Using small boats, Vendéan sailors intercepted republican supplies on rivers, including the Loire, and transported guerrillas across the battle zone with astonishing ease and speed. Scoring one success after another, the rebels simply melted away into the surrounding population when threatened by greater numbers of government soldiers. The people, for their part, supplied the guerrillas with food, shelter, clothing, medical treatment, and combat intelligence.

While the Convention’s Vendéan troubles deepened, the war against the Republic’s foreign enemies turned in the latter’s favor. The defeat of a republican army at Neerwinden, in the modern Netherlands, signaled the beginning of a fresh enemy offensive. Worse yet, the defection of the beaten army’s commander, General Charles-François Dumouriez, to the

Revolutionary France, 1789–1794



This map of Revolutionary France demonstrates how most of the country was in control of the revolutionaries, but several areas, seen here in blue, sustained counterrevolutionary resistance. The Austrian Netherlands, Savoy, and Avignon became targets of a newly expansionist France during the French Revolutionary Wars.

Austrians heralded a political crisis in Paris. Dumouriez was a staunch Girondin before switching sides, so his abandonment of the Republic symbolized for many Montagnards a larger Girondin desertion of the revolution. Very quickly, anyone associated with Dumouriez (and most Girondins in the Convention were) found himself in danger of being labeled an enemy of the state.

THE CENTER COLLAPSES

Rebellion in the countryside, defeat on the battlefield, and political turmoil were all compounded by the emergence of urban resistance to the Convention in the form of the Federalist movement. By protesting economic conditions in the cities, the Federalists rapidly gained a loyal following and soon controlled the urban centers of Lyon, Bordeaux, Marseilles, and Caen. The fact that these cities had strong Girondin sympathies convinced the radicals in the Convention to take more aggressive action against what was beginning to look like a counterrevolutionary conspiracy of vast proportions. The day after Dumouriez's defection, the Convention created yet another adjunct to the security apparatus, the Committee of Public Safety. The committee was created to assist the Committee of General Security and the Revolutionary Tribunal in their missions to defend the state, but it quickly began to eclipse both.

On April 10, with this new investigative and prosecutorial tool at his disposal, Robespierre formally accused the Girondins as a whole of having a direct role in counterrevolutionary disturbances across the country. An amateurish Girondin attempt to respond to Robespierre by accusing the wildly popular Marat of treason not only failed but also generated a wave of popular support for Marat and his radical colleagues. By early May, anti-Girondin riots had broken out in Paris and open calls had been made for a purge of Girondin deputies from the Convention. Pressing home their point, the leaders of 48 Paris sections signed a petition threatening that if the deputies could

not clean up their own house and rid it of suspect politicians, “we will ensure it ourselves.”⁶ It was no idle threat. On June 2, an angry crowd besieged the Convention and demanded the removal of 22 Girondin leaders. The Convention’s leaders, fearing that they might lose control of the situation, relented. The 22 were unseated, soon followed by another seven. The remaining Girondins fled the Convention.

All that was needed now was a single pretext to dispense once and for all with the legal and political restraints that prevented the eradication of the revolution’s opponents. It appeared on July 13, the day before the revolution’s fourth anniversary. Determined to strike a blow against the Convention, a young woman from the Federalist stronghold of Caen, Marie-Anne Charlotte de Corday d’Armont, visited Marat as he lay soaking in a medicinal bath and stabbed the revolutionary leader to death. The crime stunned Paris and convinced any who were doubtful that the danger of counterrevolution was as real as the radicals had claimed. Corday was promptly tried, convicted, and publicly guillotined. The executioner Charles Henri Sanson, in a display that provoked wild cheers from the crowd viewing Corday’s beheading, lifted her severed head from the basket into which it had fallen and slapped its cheek.

Coming so soon after the purging of the Girondins, Marat’s murder put Paris in a violently radical mood. It also left Robespierre in control of the Convention. On July 26, he was nominated to replace Georges-Jacques Danton as the head of the Committee of Public Safety. Now, virtually nothing stood between him and the future of the revolution. The only remaining obstacle, besides the lingering conflict in the Vendée and stubborn Federalist resistance, in fact, was the French inability to turn the tide of the war against Austria and Prussia. Every day, it seemed, the Austrian and Prussian armies won another battle and gained precious ground at the Republic’s expense. The Allied advance had slowed noticeably in the summer of 1793 and the enemy pressed forward on all fronts.



Seen here, a scene depicting the assassination of the radical journalist and politician Jean-Paul Marat, who was killed in his bath on July 13, 1793. This painting by Jacques-Louis David is one of the most famous images of the French Revolution.

Complicating matters was the realization that the mighty British Navy could choke off French trade at any moment. If the French Republic hoped to survive, it had to strike with all its physical and material might without delay against all of its foes, foreign and domestic.

On August 16, the Convention issued a call for a national commitment to total war. All of France's resources would be turned to the sole purpose of victory. This meant mass conscription of a kind never employed in Europe before and an expansion of the Republic's army to a size not yet witnessed in the history of European warfare. "Henceforth, until the enemies have been driven from the territory of the Republic," the Convention decreed, "the French people are in a permanent requisition for military service."⁷ All males of fighting age were called up as part of the draft, without substitution and without exception. Women were ordered to work in military industries wherever possible. All public utilities were to be devoted solely to the war effort when necessary.

The results of the enormous draft and the mobilization of the entire French nation were immediate. Despite the fall of Toulon to the British Navy on September 2, French forces made rapid gains everywhere. Through September and into October, the Allied offensive in the north was halted and reversed, and republican forces retook the Federalist city of Lyon. On October 17, a large Vendéan army was smashed at the battle of Cholet. The sheer size of the republican army allowed the Convention to juggle simultaneous operations against the enemy coalition and the counterrevolutionaries, but it was the fortitude and devotion of the citizen-soldiers created by a draft that allowed the country—and the Convention—to survive.

THE TERROR BEGINS

As the foreign and domestic enemies of the revolution were being pushed back, the Convention began a campaign to destroy less overt threats. The Law of Suspects, passed on September 17, 1793, defined reasonable suspicion of counterrevolutionary activity to be "conduct, association, speech, or writing" that questioned the authority of the Convention or demeaned its deputies.⁸ Thus, anyone who even hinted at a less-than-republican attitude was subject to arrest by the Committee of Public Safety.

If the prosecution of individuals whose loyalty was in doubt proved insufficient to the revolutionary task of unmasking and bringing traitors to justice, then a more general approach would be instituted. As one Montagnard deputy put it, ruthless measures would be warranted: "Terror will be the order of the day."⁹

THE ORDER OF THE DAY

Terror became the official government policy in France in September 1793. Fearing for the Republic, the members of the National Convention declared themselves in favor of mass arrests and execution as a tool of the state. Yet public officials outside of the Convention approved of such extreme measures as well. Below is an excerpt from a speech delivered by the mayor of Paris to the Convention urging violent excess in the name of liberty.

At this very moment, the enemies of the state are raising their swords against it . . . swords already stained with the state's own blood. . . . Every day we learn of new betrayals and new crimes. Every day we become upset at the discovery and the reappearance of new conspiracies. . . . But where is that powerful being whose terrible cry will reawaken sleeping justice . . . and force it at last to strike off criminal heads? . . . Legislators, it is time to put an end to the impious struggle that has been going on since 1789 between the sons and daughters of the nation and those who have abandoned it. . . . We must either destroy its enemies, or they will destroy us. . . .*

* "Terror is the Order of the Day," *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity: Exploring the French Revolution*. <http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/416/>.

The Convention, now fully energized, extended the revolution to the concept of time itself. The deputies retroactively declared September 20, 1792, to be the beginning of Year One on a new revolutionary calendar. They then relabeled the months of the year, substituting seasonal references for the traditional names of ancient gods and Roman personalities that compose the modern calendar. The Convention then restructured the days of the week into 10-day blocks rather than the traditional seven, thus eliminating Sunday as the terminal point. Rather than harkening back to the Roman Empire or the early Christian church, the days and months would reflect a revolutionary spirit.

Having put the calendar to radical use, its enemies to flight, and its suspects behind bars, the Convention threw off any remaining caution and suspended the constitution it had never even implemented. On October 10, the Convention announced that France would be subject to revolutionary government indefinitely. From that day forward, the Republic would be considered to be in a perpetual state of emergency. The Committee of Public Safety, as the protector of the citizenry, was granted sweeping police powers and judicial privileges. It was, henceforth, the highest authority in the land. The Terror had begun.



The Terror Unfolds

Maximilien Robespierre moved swiftly to consolidate his and the Committee of Public Safety's hold on the reins of power after the declaration of permanent revolutionary government. Seeking to erase the last vestiges of the Bourbon era, the National Convention ordered that Marie-Antoinette be brought to trial—and the guillotine. The former queen, transferred to a filthy, unheated, 6-by-11-foot (1.8-by-3.3-meter) cell at the Conciergerie prison after her husband's death, had been the target of radical abuse for the better part of eight months. Her prison guards mercilessly tormented her; the radical press vilified her and demanded her head. She was alternately referred to in Paris newspapers as the “Austrian she-wolf,” “arch-tigress,” and a “monster who needed to slake her thirst on the blood of the French.”¹

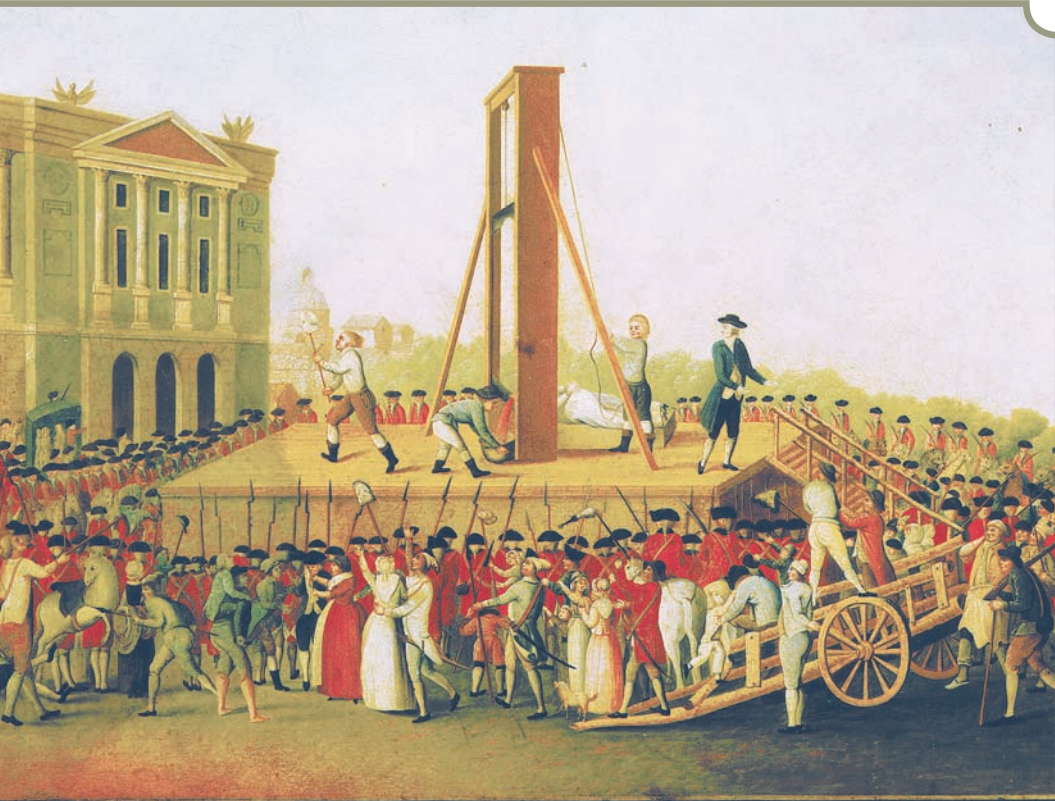
At Marie-Antoinette's trial, which opened on October 14, 1793, the state prosecutor accused her of being "the scourge and bloodsucker of the French," before presenting her with a ridiculously long list of crimes, including the physical abuse of

THE AMERICAN VIEW

Early on, American support for the French Revolution was strong. In 1789, *The Gazette of the United States* excitedly reported to its readers about "those surprising events, which have already transpired [in France]," and assured them that their French counterparts "are on the eve of establishing a new and free Constitution" not unlike the one written in Philadelphia by their own representatives.* Less than a year later, however, Americans began to worry. The revolution in France did not seem to be following the script for republican change that had been drafted by the Americans in 1776. Rather than moving away from popular violence, France seemed to be embracing a political model that had violence and repression as its centerpieces. "Great troubles are coming about" in France, one newspaper lamented. Another flatly predicted that France would soon fall victim to "a mad and despotic democracy" that would certainly betray the revolutionary ideals of liberty and justice fought for at the Bastille.** By 1793, American public opinion had soured on the French Revolution and many people had come to see it as violent and excessive.

* Bernard Fay, *The Revolutionary Spirit in France and America* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1966), p. 272.

** Ibid., p. 307.



Marie-Antoinette's execution by guillotine on October 16, 1793.

The execution of Queen Marie-Antoinette on October 16, 1793 followed a show trial that was even more of a sham than the one that had found her husband guilty. She was alleged to have committed a number of crimes, including treason and incest with her son.

her son.² Quickly convicted on all counts and condemned to death, Marie-Antoinette was returned to her cell to await execution. The woman who once sat with her husband at the pinnacle of authority and respect went to the guillotine on October 16 in a plain white dress and a simple bonnet; she was 37 years old. A Paris newspaper recorded the event with a mere note that the “widow Capet” had been executed “upon the Place de la Revolution at the foot of the statue of Liberty.”³

Mass arrests soon followed. Prominent Girondins, moderates, suspected counter-revolutionaries, priests, alleged foreign spies—all followed Marie-Antoinette's footsteps to the blade that October. So many people fell prey to the Terror that even the radical Georges-Jacques Danton was forced to admit that the killing might have gone too far. "Those men in Paris," Danton said to another worried deputy, "will guillotine the entire Republic."⁴ He had no idea how accurate his prediction would prove to be. By early December, public executions of supposed state enemies were increasing daily. On one particular occasion, 32 heads fell into Charles Henri Sanson's basket within 25 minutes. A week later 12 heads were lopped off in only five minutes. As one observer reported, the guillotining became almost a routine daily occurrence in Paris: "[E]veryday more heads fall."⁵

LIVES FOR LIBERTY

The blood flowed just as freely outside of the capital as within its limits. This was especially so in Vendée, where armed resistance was being met by vicious republican reprisals. By the fall of 1793, the Vendéan rebellion was crumbling. As it collapsed, the government exacted a heavy price in lives. Revenge on a massive scale swept over the region. In Nantes, the representative-on-mission, Jean-Baptiste Carrier, went on a rampage of murder and destruction. He began with those already under his control, when he "indiscriminately seized upon the people in the prisons . . . placed them in boats and drowned them in the Loire."⁶ Next, Carrier had 90 priests tried and summarily executed as traitors in a similar manner. Carrier jokingly referred to such episodes of mass drowning as "republican baptisms"⁷ and "national swimming baths."⁸ Hundreds more victims followed, as Carrier consigned the innocent and guilty alike to death, not only by drowning but also by shooting, hacking, hammering, burning alive, and, of course, guillotining.

Further defeats of rebel armies led to further bloodshed. Prisoners of war captured by republican units near Le Mans were

shot on Carrier's orders as he worked feverishly "to purge liberty's earth of these monsters."⁹ The survivors of a Vendéan loss at the battle of Savenay were executed by gunfire and bayonet by a republican general who claimed that "pity is not revolutionary."¹⁰

Meanwhile, Federalist bastions fell one after another, bringing the urban resistance movement to an abrupt end. On December 19, British-occupied Toulon was retaken after a brilliant operation led by a little-known Corsican artillery officer who idolized the revolutionary leadership. "Marat and Robespierre, those are my saints!" exclaimed Napoleon Bonaparte.¹¹ Clearly a competent and loyal soldier, Bonaparte dutifully returned the city to its representative-on-mission, who subsequently launched a wave of reprisal killings. The report he filed soon afterward on his activities boasted that since he reassumed authority, "we have caused two hundred heads a day to fall."¹² The Convention was assured that the "national vengeance has been unfurled [in Toulon]. . . . We are killing everything that moves."¹³ Even the name of the city died. The Convention ordered Toulon rechristened in republican fashion; it would henceforth be known as Port-de-la-Montagne, in honor of Robespierre's Montagnards.

Similar fates befell Lyon and Marseille. Lyon witnessed mass beheadings and was then slated for complete physical destruction. "The city of Lyon shall be destroyed. . . . The name Lyon shall be erased," the Convention decreed, and a "column shall be erected upon the ruins. . . . It shall bear the inscription, 'Lyon made war upon Liberty, and has perished.'¹⁴ Marseille was likewise to be obliterated after the guillotine's blade stopped falling there. The Convention ordered that future maps of France would replace the city's location with a dot labeled "Without Name."¹⁵

The final blow for the Vendéans came in January 1794. Given the singular mission "to burn everything, leave nothing,"¹⁶ General Louis-Marie Turreau was sent into the Vendée

at the head of 12 “infernal columns”¹⁷ and ordered to devastate the entire region. By the time he was finished, anywhere from 40,000 to 250,000 Vendéans lay dead. Turreau oversaw the mass murder of perhaps a third of the area’s inhabitants, leading the general to assure the Convention deputies that nothing remained to be destroyed. When asked by the deputies to report on the state of the region after his campaign of annihilation, Turreau said simply, “There is no more Vendée, citizens.”¹⁸

THE REVOLUTION CONSUMES ITS OWN

Back in Paris, the grim procession of suspects to the guillotine continued uninterrupted. Every day, more victims were “shaved by the national razor,” or taken for a “look through the republican window.”¹⁹ Gradually, the circle of potential targets widened to include not only suspected counterrevolutionaries but also radicals who refused to accept Robespierre’s leadership, such as the journalist Jacques René Hébert and Robespierre’s longtime colleague and fellow Montagnard, Danton. By early 1794, Robespierre felt that his Republic was threatened by anyone who did not share his peculiar vision, including the more moderate Danton. Troubled by the seemingly insatiable appetite of the guillotine, Danton had broken with Robespierre over the direction of the revolution. While Robespierre advocated a thorough cleansing of the nation—a purification by blood—Danton argued that the most significant threats to the Republic had already been neutralized and that the time had come for political normalization. At some point, Danton felt, the revolution had to end and stable, rational government had to begin.

Robespierre, however, was not a man to accept constructive criticism. He moved against his perceived enemies in March 1794. He dealt with Hébert first, having the journalist and 19 of his closest associates rounded up and charged with conspiracy to commit treason. They were guillotined on March 24. Danton’s

turn came next, but not before he made one last attempt at reconciliation with Robespierre. Danton requested a meeting with his former revolutionary colleague and begged him to end the Terror for the sake of France, and then broke down in tears. Robespierre, as cold and aloof as ever, dismissed Danton's request as the pleadings of a ruined and irrelevant man. Danton, moreover, disgusted Robespierre with his emotional display. Danton, Robespierre sniffed, "made himself ridiculous with melodramatic posturing and tears."²⁰ Upon parting, Robespierre icily refused to embrace his sobbing revolutionary comrade.

Robespierre, with the help of Louis-Antoine de Saint-Just, moved against Danton on March 30, 1794. Robespierre had arrest warrants issued, charging Danton and several associates with being "enemies of the Republic."²¹ That night, the fateful knock came at Danton's door. After his arrest, Danton was taken to the same Conciergerie prison that once had held Marie-Antoinette, while Robespierre made his case before a full session of the National Convention. "Danton . . . in my eyes [is] nothing less than an enemy of the *patrie* ['homeland']," Robespierre bellowed.²² The deputies agreed and Danton was set for trial before the Revolutionary Tribunal. When told of the Convention's decision, Danton predicted that he would not fall from revolutionary grace alone: "Robespierre will follow; I will drag him down."²³

Danton was tried on April 2 and, as so often before with the Republic's enemies, his conviction was certain. Sentenced to die after only two hours of deliberation by the tribunal, Danton issued another prediction. Within three months, he said, Saint-Just and Robespierre would also meet their ends under the blade. On April 5, 1793, Georges-Jacques Danton, one of the earliest of the revolutionaries and a founder of the Republic, went to the guillotine. Standing defiantly before Sanson, Danton told the executioner, "Don't forget to show my head to the people; it's worth seeing."²⁴

THE FALL OF ROBESPIERRE

Danton was followed to the guillotine by a long line of Robespierre's political enemies, real and imagined. Anyone who defied him or the Committee of Public Safety did not live long. Robespierre's control over the machinery of terror, and thus over France itself, was now complete. The shy lawyer from Arras was free to remake France in his own image, beginning with what remained of legal Christian worship. No atheist, Robespierre did believe in a God, of sorts. His deity, however, was reason. Robespierre, therefore, decided that reason would form the core of a new revolutionary religion of the Supreme Being to replace traditional Christianity. The spiritual capital of the new faith would be the Cathedral of Notre Dame, renamed the Temple of Reason. After religion, Robespierre expanded his campaign to redesign France to art, science, music, literature, and architecture, demanding that practitioners in each field direct their energies toward promoting the glory of the Republic and the virtue of the citizenry.

The final act of Robespierre's revolutionary cleansing in France came on June 8. Having set the day aside for the Festival of the Supreme Being, Robespierre led a public procession to the Champs de Mars. The march went past a Place de la Revolution scrubbed clean of blood and from which the guillotine had been temporarily removed. When the throng reached the Tuileries palace, Robespierre gave a brief speech in which he reminded his followers of their sacred duty: "French Republicans, it is for you to purify the earth."²⁵ At their final destination, the marchers were greeted by a huge cardboard and canvas mountain, symbolizing the Montagnards, topped with a statue of Hercules holding the figure of Liberty cupped in his hands. Robespierre, at a predetermined moment, melodramatically ascended to the top of the artificial mountain in a plumed hat and wearing a red, white, and blue sash to the accompaniment of 2,400 Parisians singing "La Marseillaise."

After another short speech, Robespierre burned three paper statues symbolizing the three republican sins of Atheism, Egoism, and Insincerity; out of their ashes arose an unscathed figure of Wisdom. For his finale, Robespierre descended the mountain, Moses-like, as the crowd roared its approval. "Look at [him]," one disgusted Convention deputy said to his neighbor in the audience, "It's not enough for him to be master, he has to be God."²⁶

Two days after the festival, Robespierre pushed the Law of 22 Prairial through the Convention. The law transferred control of the Revolutionary Tribunal to the Committee of Public Safety; in other words, to Robespierre himself. All of the agencies of state security were now in his hands.

Arrests, conviction, and death sentences for an array of political crimes soared. From March to May 1794, 155 people were guillotined in Paris; in the month following the Law of 22 Prairial that number reached a staggering 1,647. On June 28 alone, 54 men and women went under Sanson's blade. Over the next few weeks, executions spun out of control. Heads came off for careless words, petty gossip, and even suspect facial expressions. Paris's cemeteries filled so quickly that ditches were dug outside the capital to handle growing piles of bodies. The death toll rose to levels that made even determined revolutionaries wonder, "My God, when will they have enough blood?"²⁷

The Republic's thirst for blood, if not Robespierre's, was indeed close to the point of being sated. As more people died every day, sympathy for the victims became more common. Questions about Robespierre's motives and leadership were raised. Cartoons began to appear showing France as a wasteland carpeted with heads and the only man left, Robespierre, guillotining Sanson. The patience of the French people finally ended when children began to go to the blade. In one instance, a little girl climbed the scaffold and left the crowd before her in shamed silence when she asked Sanson, "Monsieur, am I doing it right?"²⁸

France had had enough. As bread supplies fell and prices went up, lines at bakeries now matched the daily lines at the guillotine. Shortages of other foodstuffs followed, as did the utter collapse of the assignat, which plummeted to 36 percent of the currency's face value. In response, Robespierre and Saint-Just addressed the Convention and claimed that conspiracy threatened to undo the work of the revolution. The Terror had to continue until all of the republic's enemies were dead. At this, for the first time, denunciations of Robespierre and his allies rang out through the hall. The next day, when Robespierre again rose to speak, his voice trembled. "Danton's blood is choking him!"²⁹ a deputy cried out. Others echoed his words, denouncing Robespierre as a monster, a fanatic, and a maniac. He meant to usurp power himself, it was charged, and become a new king of France. For days, the verbal assault continued, until on July 27, the Convention voted to issue arrest warrants for Robespierre, Saint-Just, and a handful of their closest associates on charges of plotting to overthrow the Republic. "Robespierre's turn had come at last," a relieved deputy exclaimed.³⁰

At 4:00 P.M. that day, Robespierre was arrested, but he quickly escaped and took refuge at the Hotel de Ville. There, his brother Augustin, Saint-Just, and a close friend, Georges Couthon, joined him. Having eluded their foes, the hunted men spent the rest of the night planning their next move. Their hideout, however, was discovered early the next morning and was stormed by armed men sent by the Convention. During the subsequent struggle, Robespierre put a pistol to his head and attempted to commit suicide. The attempt failed; Robespierre managed only to blow off a large chunk of his lower jaw.

Mangled, bloodied, and silenced by his massive wound, Robespierre was dragged before the Convention to hear his death sentence pronounced. He was taken from there to his old office at the Committee of Public Safety to await execution. Laid out on a table in excruciating pain, Robespierre was exposed to



Seen here, Robespierre lying shot at the Hotel de Ville in July 1794. The former radical revolutionary leader had tried to kill himself with a pistol, but was arrested and guillotined the following day.

the taunts and jeers of gawkers, who were allowed in to see the man who until very recently had held sway of life and death in France. A doctor was called in to treat Robespierre's wounded jaw, but he could do nothing to alleviate the pain. Robespierre was thus left to suffer through his final hours on earth.

At six o'clock on the evening of July 28, Robespierre was tossed into a tumbrel (a vehicle used to transport prisoners) for the ride to the Place de la Revolution, along with Saint-Just and Couthon. Once at the scaffold, Couthon went under the blade first, followed by Saint-Just, who yelled to the crowd, "There is no rest for the revolutionary except the grave."³¹ By the time Robespierre came to the guillotine, the platform was drenched in blood. Sanson, laying him on the plank, noticed that the bandage holding Robespierre's face together would obstruct

the quick kill his machine was supposed to deliver. Without any thought, the executioner tore the wrapping off, leading to a guttural, gurgling scream from what was left of Robespierre's mouth. With that, Robespierre was pushed into position and the blade dropped. In a single, brief moment, the architect of the Terror was himself dead, a sacrifice to the Republic he had helped to create. Perhaps 35,000 to 40,000 people had fallen victim to the fury Robespierre and his followers had unleashed. France could now begin the long and arduous road to recovery.



The Coming of Napoleon

The day after Maximilien Robespierre's head fell, 71 of his closest associates and Jacobin cadres were similarly guillotined, inaugurating what has become known as the Thermidorean Reaction, named for the revolutionary-calendar month of Thermidor (July) in which it began. In the National Convention, the Reaction started with a round of personal denunciations that branded Robespierre as a “monster,” a “hypocrite,” and a “tiger corrupted by the taste of blood.”¹ Next, the deputies systematically purged every legislative and executive committee of anyone even mildly sympathetic to Jacobin ideals, devastating the ranks of the Montagnard faction. The Convention then moved to dissolve the Paris Commune, the font of radicalism in France. The Law of Suspects and the Law of 22 Prairial were both repealed, as were the harshest

anticlerical measures. Former Girondins were readmitted to the Convention, and a committee was set up to detail and condemn the crimes of 1793–1794. The jails were cleared of political prisoners arrested by the Committee of Public Safety, and the most energetic killers among the representatives-on-mission and army generals, including Jean-Baptiste Carrier and Louis-Marie Turreau, were arrested. After a series of mob attacks on its headquarters in November 1794, the Jacobin Club was closed permanently on direct orders from the Convention. The people of France, however, demanded more than anti-Jacobin symbolism and investigative committees. They wanted revenge.

A NEW TERROR AND A NEW CONSTITUTION

The revolutionary pendulum now swung violently to the right. Across France, former radicals and ex-Jacobins were brutally assaulted and sometimes killed by reactionary mobs. Even dead radicals were not safe. Jean-Paul Marat's body, which had lain undisturbed in the Paris Pantheon for more than a year, was disinterred by the Convention in December 1794.

Still, the citizens were not satisfied. Blood had to be repaid with blood. In May and June 1795, violence against radicals increased in severity and frequency. These outbursts extended as far as the Convention hall itself, which was stormed twice by crowds demanding extreme measures to suppress diehard Jacobins and Montagnards. In Lyon, former Montagnard officials were murdered in broad daylight. Marseilles experienced a wave of brutality that left more than 100 members of the Jacobin Club dead on the streets.

Economic woes exacerbated the tension and unrest. The winter of 1794–1795 was one of the coldest on record. Shortages of firewood and food became chronic. Prices for staples such as sugar, flour, and butter rose sharply. At an estimated price equivalent to \$64 per pound (0.4 kilogram) in modern money,

bread became almost unattainable. The assignat became practically worthless, falling to just 10 to 15 percent of face value. As everyone blamed the Convention, the citizenry began demanding “Bread and the Constitution of 1793.”²

The National Convention came under intense pressure to reform the economy, the Republic, and itself. News of success on the battlefield relieved some of that pressure; at least it bought the deputies time to save their careers and the revolution. In April 1795, Prussia signed a peace treaty and withdrew its forces from the war after suffering a series of defeats. The Dutch Republic surrendered and was partially occupied a month later. The death of Louis-Charles, the boy who was supposed to grow up to become Louis XVII, in the Temple prison on June 8 likewise worked in the Convention’s favor. Peace with Spain in July helped, too. Still, the Convention knew that change had to come. Even with military victory, France needed a new government, one instituted and legitimized by a new constitution. Working without delay, the Convention drew up and approved the Constitution of Year III in September 1794.

Although hastily drafted, the constitution was a solid piece of work that established a novel structure for governing the Republic. Following the results of an election scheduled for October 12, the Convention would be replaced by a bicameral legislature made up of two houses: the Council of Ancients and the Council of 500. By decree, two-thirds of the new legislators would have to be former National Convention deputies. The executive branch would consist of a Directory of five men, nominated by the Council of 500 and confirmed by the Ancients. Every year, one director would retire and be replaced by another, chosen by lot by the Ancients from a list of candidates provided by the 500. The Convention hoped that the Directory would bring order and calm to the Republic. Instead, the Directory would help launch the career of the man who would ultimately destroy it.



Napoleon Bonaparte rose through the ranks of the embattled French army to not only seize control of the French Revolution, but ultimately, much of Europe itself as emperor from 1804 to 1815. He was only defeated when a coalition of European powers managed to retake the continent from him.

THE WHIFF OF GRAPESHOT

Although Parisians welcomed the new constitution and its proposed Directory, the Two-Thirds Decree generated a storm of protest. Nearly every Paris section opposed the measure as being contradictory to true reform. On October 3, only nine days before elections, 25,000 National Guard troops mutinied and joined the sections in opposition. Defending the Convention were a mere 5,000 men under the command of General Paul Barras. He was joined by the man credited with having recaptured Toulon, Napoleon Bonaparte. Desperate for a transfer from artillery command to the Army of Italy, Bonaparte had gone so far as to fail to report for duty at his post in the Vendée and was slated for a court-martial in late September; the Paris unrest gave him a second chance. Recalled to protect the Convention against the Guard and the sections, Bonaparte took command of Barras's cannons.

Here he showed his true potential. After arranging to have cannons and shells slip through hostile streets to his position, Bonaparte ordered their placement along key routes to the Tuileries and the Convention. As morning became afternoon, the National Guard mutineers and their supporters gathered and began marching up the Rue Honoré in a drenching rain, directly toward Bonaparte's guns. At 4:00 P.M., the mass of angry citizens were halted near the Church of Saint-Roch by two cannons firing masses of lead balls known as grapeshot. Bonaparte personally ordered the guns to fire the tightly packed balls that now tore into the terrified marchers. The fighting that ensued was confused but ultimately led to the defeat of the guardsmen and the collapse of resistance to the Convention.

The soon-to-be-replaced Convention had been saved, and Bonaparte was given credit for preserving the Republic. When the deputies reconvened, it was in special session to praise Bonaparte and to promote him to the rank of general. The man himself received the honor with his characteristic nonchalance. Bonaparte wrote to his brother, Joseph, that he

had “killed a lot of their people. . . . Everything is calm. . . . As usual, I am not wounded.”³

THE MASTER OF ITALY

The October elections were held without further incident. The Directory came into office on October 27, 1795, after the Convention’s last official act, the renaming of the Place de la Revolution as the Place de la Concorde. The place of revolution was now the place of harmony. As a reward for the defense of the Convention, Barras was made a director in the new government. Bonaparte was appointed as second in command of the Army of the Interior and given responsibility for the security of the capital, a singular honor. Bonaparte, however, continued to lobby for command of the Army of Italy. Convinced of his destiny, the “Little Corsican,” as his fellow officers derisively called him, demanded a transfer. Barras, hoping to buy off Bonaparte with love, offered the general a woman instead of Italy. Josephine Beauharnais was the beautiful, Caribbean-born widow of a nobleman who had two sons. Although she claimed to be 28-years old, she was actually four years older. That did not matter, though; Josephine’s Creole charm and beauty quickly entranced Bonaparte, who fell madly in love with the exotic woman. “Sweet and incomparable Josephine,” Bonaparte wrote in the first of many love letters produced by him over the next four years, “what strange power you have over my heart!”⁴

Bonaparte’s greatest desires in life, marriage to Josephine and command of the Army of Italy, were realized in March 1796. The Directory, at Barras’s insistence, gave Bonaparte the Army of Italy on March 2. Under orders to wage war against the Austrians, one of France’s two remaining enemies (the other being Great Britain), Bonaparte was dispatched to the army’s headquarters in Nice. Later that month, Bonaparte married the widow Beauharnais. Not long after his wedding, Bonaparte left for Nice. Along the way, he wrote a letter to Josephine at each coach stop.

Despite recapturing Toulon and saving the Convention, Bonaparte was not well thought of among his fellow officers. Most of his new colleagues considered him to be little more than a political general. He was dubbed by some “General October,” the whiff of grapeshot being the sum of his most recent combat experience. Others were more pointed in their critiques. “This Corsican has no other reputation than that of a good gun commander,” one complained. “As a general he is only known by the Parisians.”⁵ More than a few officers in the Army of Italy were immediately put off by Bonaparte’s physical appearance. Besides being noticeably short, Bonaparte was described as “skinny, very pale, with black eyes in sunken cheeks, [and] long hair falling from his temples to his shoulders.”⁶

Still, circumstances demanded that the staff officers cooperate with their new leader. The job before them would be difficult enough without petty infighting. Enemy forces in Italy numbered about 32,000 Austrian soldiers backed by nearly 40,000 Piedmontese troops. Off the coast, a fully equipped and operational British naval squadron in the Tyrrhenian Sea supported the Austrians. The Army of Italy counted about 63,000 men in all, but only 30,000 of these were fit for duty. Bonaparte had a grand total of 24 artillery pieces—a mere handful compared to the guns of the Austrians. Yet the general was convinced that his soldiers could sweep their opponents from northern Italy. “Soldiers! . . . The government owes you much; it can give you nothing,” Bonaparte exclaimed in an address to the troops just before their departure for Italy on March 31. “I want to lead you into the most fertile plains on earth. . . . [T]here you will find honour, glory, and riches.”⁷

With that, Bonaparte and his army left France, determined to “seize all of Austrian Lombardy as far as Mantua and chase [the enemy] from Italy,” as the Directory had ordered.⁸ He moved with such speed that his own officers were astounded by the amount of ground they were covering: “We don’t march, we fly,” one wrote.⁹ By the end of April, Piedmont had been

BONAPARTE IN LOVE

Napoleon Bonaparte's only true, great love in his life was Josephine. During his campaigns, he was continually haunted by her absence and craved reunion. Personal letters were his only contact with her, and those barely sufficed to express the depth of his adoration. While in Italy, for example, Bonaparte wrote to Josephine, "To die without being loved by you . . . is the torment of hell, the acute and striking image of absolute annihilation." On another occasion, he remarked that in camp, "I thought only of you, it made everything unbearable." Noticing his own distraction from the mission of taking Italy from the Austrians, Bonaparte admitted to his wife that his fear of "not being loved by Josephine" kept him from concentrating on the developing military situation. "I am making trouble for myself," he wrote. "There are so many real difficulties! Do I need to invent them!!!"*



Josephine de Beauharnais, the consort of Napoleon Bonaparte, became empress of France. She was the great love of Napoleon's life.

* Philip Dwyer, *Napoleon: The Path to Power* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 223-224.

crushed, and its army's battle flags sent to Paris as trophies. At Lodi, on May 10, Bonaparte savaged an Austrian contingent and took control of a crucial bridge leading into Austrian territory. "I saw the world flee before me" at Lodi, Bonaparte boasted.¹⁰ A captured Hungarian officer expressed the frustration felt by many in the Austrian army when he complained about the new type of warfare that Bonaparte's speed and maneuverability heralded: "[W]e are dealing with a young general who is sometimes in front of us, sometimes in our rear, sometimes on our flanks."¹¹ Confounded by novel tactics and Bonaparte's determination, the Austrian forces in Italy could do little but retreat before him.

EGYPT

By early 1797, Bonaparte controlled northern Italy and was ready for new challenges. In December of that year, he received a hero's welcome in Paris and immediately began pressing the Directory for permission to embark on a new adventure. France had been planning an invasion of England for some time, but Bonaparte urged its cancellation in favor of a much more achievable alternative: Egypt. It was there that the British supply line to India could be cut, he argued, and where the British economy could be devastated and the island kingdom could be brought to its knees. For Bonaparte, personally, an invasion of Egypt meant conquest of the Middle East, and it was there "that great glory can be won."¹²

Persuaded by Bonaparte's reasoning and enthusiasm, the Directory approved an Egyptian campaign in March 1798. On April 12, it created a new command for him, the Army of the Orient. Oddly enough, even with 25,000 infantry, 3,000 cavalry, and 1,500 artillerymen now at his disposal, Bonaparte was not satisfied. The Egyptian expedition meant more to him than another war of conquest. Being his first operation in a non-European country, it represented an opportunity to reshape a faraway, alien land in France's image. He would go to

Egypt and bring “the advantages of a perfected civilization” to a people “plunged into barbarism” by their Muslim Mameluke rulers.¹³ Chief among these advantages was liberty, French liberty. Toward this end, Bonaparte gathered together an array of scientists, scholars, artists, engineers, and technicians to accompany him. When he left Toulon on May 19, 1798, bound for the ancient land along the Nile, he also carried along as baggage 300 books from his personal library. Although he did not know it at the time, Bonaparte’s fleet would be shadowed most of the way by a British task force under the command of Admiral Horatio Nelson.

It was Nelson who caught Bonaparte’s fleet at anchor in Aboukir Bay on August 1, exactly one month after the French had landed in Egypt, and annihilated it in what history remembers as the Battle of the Nile. French losses of sailors and marines included 1,700 dead, 1,500 wounded, and 3,000 captured. Combined British casualties stood at just 900. Surveying the water after the Battle of the Nile, Nelson remarked, “Victory is certainly not a name strong enough for such a scene.”¹⁴ Bonaparte noted dryly that “the fates . . . have made our rivals the rulers of the waves.”¹⁵ He knew, at that moment, that Egypt was lost.

THE COUP OF 18 BRUMAIRE

For the next year, Bonaparte worked tirelessly to salvage some kind of triumph out of the ruins of his Egyptian expedition. His situation, however, was hopeless. With British mastery of the sea, it was only a matter of time before the isolated Army of the Orient would be forced to surrender. But news of the formation of a Second Coalition against France—a powerful alliance that included Britain, Russia, Austria, Portugal, Naples, and Turkey—prompted Bonaparte to action once more. Blocked at sea, Bonaparte launched a major offensive in the spring of 1799 into Palestine in a forlorn attempt to open an overland passage out of Egypt. The operation failed miserably. By August, his army

was in even worse condition. Despite an important victory over the Mamelukes at Aboukir, the French army in Egypt was on the point of collapse. Bonaparte decided it was time to return home—alone. In the middle of the night on August 22, the general secretly boarded a frigate bound for France with a handful of his closest companions and abandoned what remained of his expeditionary force.

After many stops and delays, his tiny fleet reached home in October, just as news of the success at Aboukir broke. Sensing an opportunity, Bonaparte encouraged a popular misunderstanding of Aboukir's relative significance and inflated the impact of his triumph. His return also coincided with a sharp downturn in the French economy and a surging wave of urban crime. It thus took very little effort to make Bonaparte appear as the Republic's savior, and the general did all he could to play the part of the heroic rescuer. When he arrived in Paris, Bonaparte made a point of publicly chastising the Directory for the state of public affairs. "What have you done with the country that I left so powerful?" he asked the directors rhetorically.¹⁶

Bonaparte, though, was not the only one in the capital thinking that the Directory had failed. One of its own members, Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, had long before become disillusioned with the government and the Constitution of Year III. Through Bonaparte's brother, Lucian, Sieyès approached Bonaparte with a proposition. If Sieyès could secure a military command for Bonaparte, would the general join in a coup to overthrow the Directory? If so, the cunning director would guarantee Bonaparte a leading role in the new order. It was an offer that intrigued the Little Corsican.

Over the following weeks, Bonaparte was drawn ever deeper into the plot. He soon gave his full commitment to the conspirators and began planning for a quick, clean seizure of power. Early on the morning of November 9—18 Brumaire on the revolutionary calendar—the coup went forward. Rudely awakened by soldiers and hustled to the Tuileries, the Council

of 500 was informed by Sieyès of an unspecified threat to the Republic. The Council was then asked by Sieyès and Roger Ducos, a fellow director and coconspirator, to approve a relocation of both houses of the legislature to the town of Saint-Cloud, just outside Paris, for security reasons. Bonaparte would take over the city's defenses and protect the capital in their absence. Left with no choice, the Council gave its consent both to the move to Saint-Cloud and to Bonaparte's promotion.

The Directory collapsed. Once at Saint-Cloud, the legislators tried to reconvene, but Bonaparte had their chambers cleared by soldiers who stormed in and declared, "In the name of General Bonaparte, the legislature is dissolved."¹⁷ On the night of November 10, 30 of the weakest and most pliable deputies were recalled and forced to vote to replace the Directory with an executive committee made up of three consuls, as they were called: Sieyès, Ducos, and Bonaparte. The members of the new Consulate were sworn in at two o'clock the next morning, each one pledging to defend peace, order, and stability while raising their hands in the stiff-armed Roman salute made infamous more than a century later by the Nazis in Germany. In that single moment, the republican promise of 1789 ended in dictatorship. The liberty, equality, and fraternity for which so many people had suffered and died faded from view. The French Revolution was over.



The Legacy of the French Revolution

Between 1799 and 1804, Bonaparte consolidated his hold on power in France. Another new constitution in 1800, ratified overwhelmingly by the French electorate, formalized his authority as First Consul. An agreement, or Concordat, with the Catholic Church healed the wound opened by the Civil Constitution of the Clergy in 1790 and endeared Bonaparte to the nation's religious elite. Four years later, in 1804, Bonaparte relieved France of its burdensome New World possessions by selling Louisiana to the United States and by granting Haiti its independence, ending a long and bloody insurgency there. Freed from these constraints, Bonaparte audaciously declared France an empire and made himself Emperor Napoleon I. He then led his people into their fourth and final war with the other great powers of Europe, a war that ended at Waterloo in 1815 with Napoleon's downfall. Defeated, Napoleon went

The Napoleonic Wars, 1792–1815



This map shows the expansion of Napoleon's empire. By 1809, much of central Europe was controlled by governments dependent on Napoleon for their stability. By 1812, the year of his ill-conceived invasion of Russia, Napoleon and his family controlled Italy, Spain, and northern Germany, and were allied with Denmark, Norway, Prussia, and the Austrian Empire.

into exile and left France to a restored Bourbon monarchy. For the next 34 years, one French king after another struggled to reverse the cultural and social changes brought by the revolution. An idea had been released that was too strong and durable to be erased by any royal decree, an idea called citizenship.

LIBERTY

The word “citizen” had been in existence for millennia before the French Revolution. The ancient Greeks and Romans had both used it. Yet to them, citizenship had been defined as a privilege to be granted or revoked as the state saw fit. Later, the Italian city-states of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries emphasized the role of the citizen in civic life, but similarly viewed citizenship as a privilege dependent upon the virtue of the holder and his willingness to render service to the republic. Neither the ancients nor the Italian republics had considered the idea of the citizen as being someone possessing a natural right to participate in the political life of the state, and certainly no one before the late-seventeenth century or early eighteenth century conceived of citizenship as a function of liberty.

To be sure, one had to be free to be a citizen in ancient Greece or Rome, or the Italian city-states, but freedom in this case meant not being bound to or by any other person. Slaves, servants, women, and other dependent persons were thus excluded from citizenship, because they were not free. This kind of freedom, though, was very different from liberty. Liberty, as the idea developed during the eighteenth century, was a natural right, possessed by an individual by virtue of their humanity. Liberty could be suppressed but never denied. Enlightenment philosophers in England and France were the first to connect this notion to the institution of citizenship, but its practical expression came first during the American Revolution. The American revolutionaries early on tied their political struggle against Great Britain to a larger striving for liberty. When independence came in 1783, the founders of

the American republic made individual liberty and citizenship hallmarks of their new order. Together, they defined the word American, and yet, even in the early days of the new republican United States, liberty was constrained and citizenship was set clearly within the boundaries of race, class, and gender. The connection between the two concepts was not yet complete.

The French revolutionaries, building on the American foundation, took the next step. Not only did they conceive of citizenship in more broadly inclusive terms than the Americans had, but they also understood it to be inextricably bound together with liberty. Liberty granted citizenship; citizenship represented the full flowering of liberty. Involvement in the affairs of government and general participation in the life of the state, therefore, became the natural right of a citizen, timeless and inalienable. More so than in the United States, then, the words *citizen* and *liberty* became virtually interchangeable in republican France.

EQUALITY

True liberty required that citizenship be extended as broadly and evenly as possible. All citizens should be able to lay claim to liberty equally. Society would be leveled as a result. Saint-Just opposed Louis XVI's trial on this very point. By granting a trial to Louis Capet, Saint-Just argued, the Republic was putting the former king on a par with loyal revolutionaries. "Judge a king as a citizen?" Saint-Just asked rhetorically in 1792.¹ The idea, to his mind, was unthinkable. Trials were reserved for those given "the rank of citizen" and no one else.²

To identify someone as a citizen was to identify them as an equal participant in the life of the state. Certainly this notion had been debated in Greece and Rome, and the early Italian city-states had moved tentatively in the direction of linking citizenship and equality. Still it must be remembered, in the words of one historian, that as with ancient Greece and Rome, "medieval Italy was no hotbed of radical egalitarianism."³ Even

in revolutionary America, the land of liberty trees and the Liberty Bell, equality was, at first, restricted to white, property-holding males.

Across the Atlantic, on the other hand, despite a distinction between voting and nonvoting classifications and a tacit recognition of women's lower status, citizenship brought the French together into a republican community where class, color, wealth, and gender meant less politically than ever

THE RISE OF THE NATION-STATE

Revolutionary France took the idea of the nation-state to a new level with its obsessive concentration on the *patrie*, the fatherland, as the axis along which all legitimate political activity was arranged. Even the new United States did not place the nation as central to the lives of its citizens. The notion of the state as being larger than the sum of its citizens, however, did not originate with the men of 1789. The nation-state, in fact, had its origins in the aftermath of the infamous Black Death. The pandemic outbreak of plague that swept across Eurasia in the fourteenth century and killed perhaps a third of Europeans, functionally destroyed the feudal system that had shaped and directed life in Europe for more than 300 years. Feudalism—based on an ever-growing labor pool managed by powerful local and regional nobles—could not survive a calamity that felled millions of peasants and left their noble masters with few workers. In its stead arose a highly centralized system in which Europe's kings and their royal governments took over the management of national affairs, thus bringing the king and subjects together into the new nation-state.

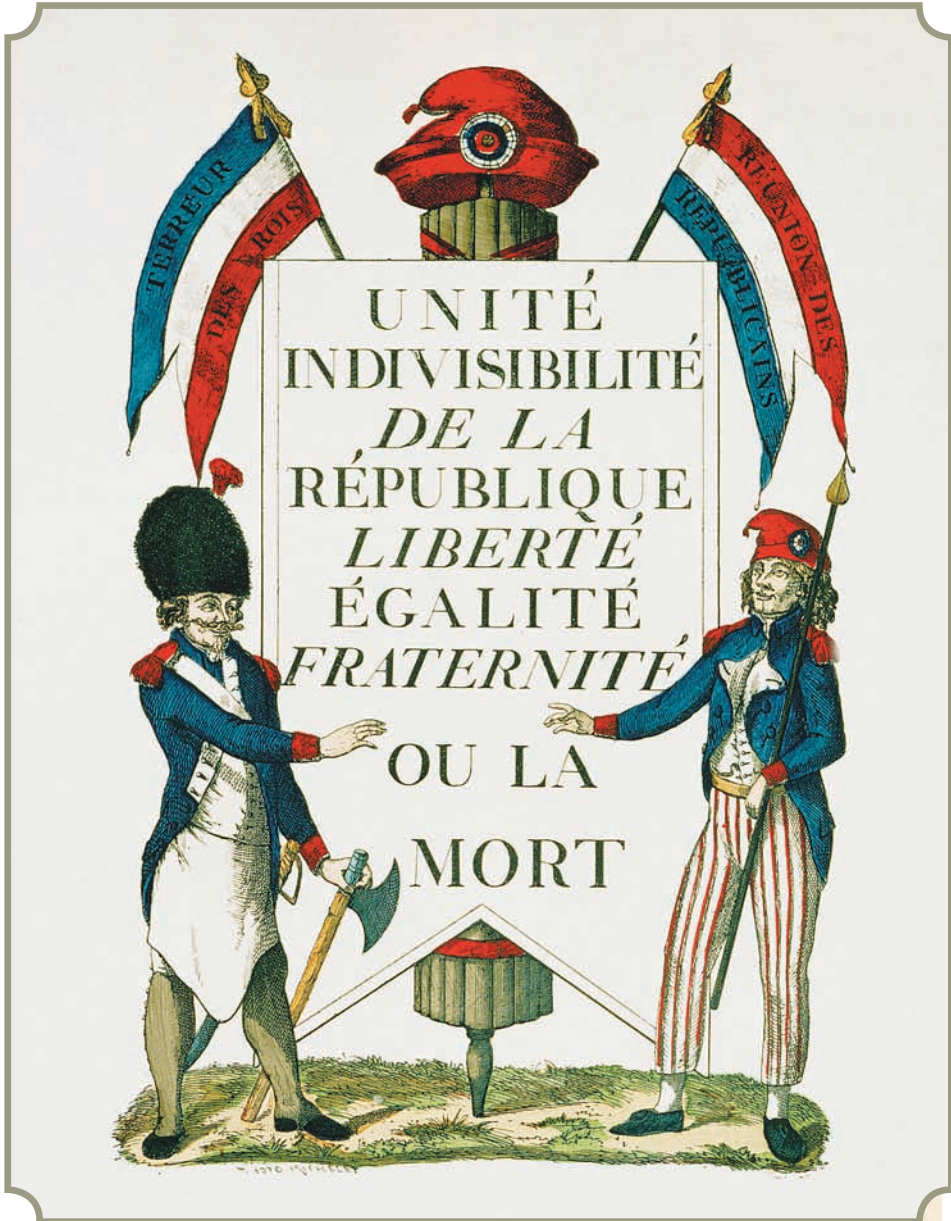
before. (That said, it must be noted that race issues were not as prominent in France, which did not have a large black population, like the United States.) What counted most was devotion to one's *patrie*, the fatherland. Patriotism defined a community of equals as a nation of citizens.

FRATERNITY

The term "patriot" had become a revolutionary title of honor in the American Revolution. Patriotism was understood to mean love of country and a selfless devotion to service that marked a citizen as virtuous and deserving of the rewards of liberty. American patriotism was personified in the figure of George Washington, a man whose service to his country became legendary. In revolutionary France, the ideal of service in the interests of the nation similarly shaped the contours of republicanism. Yet rather than limiting the scope of patriotism to a national fraternity of citizens, as someone like Washington would have advocated, French republicans followed a course that another American president, Thomas Jefferson, later championed.

Jefferson, undoubtedly influenced by his stay in France during the early days of the French Revolution, understood the concept of fraternity—literally a brotherhood of citizens—to extend beyond the borders of any particular nation-state. Notwithstanding his fierce devotion to the sovereignty of the new United States of America, Jefferson envisioned "an Empire of Liberty" radiating far beyond the boundaries of his young republic and encompassing the entire North American continent to create "an extensive empire . . . one of the greatest and most formidable that ever was in the world."⁴

Although an overseas American "empire" would begin to emerge in the 1890s, the French moved much earlier and more aggressively to extend what they saw as the blessings of liberty across Europe. An underlying objective of the Wars of the French Revolution, in fact, was the spread of republicanism abroad; even Bonaparte saw his conquests as a vehicle for the



The motto of the French Revolution, *Liberté, Égalité, et Fraternité* ("Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity"), is depicted in this period illustration over the subtitle *Ou la Mort* ("Or Death"). Despite the enormous cost in lives, the French Revolution helped set the nations of Europe on the path to republican forms of government.

liberation of foreign peoples. The National Convention, in fact, made this point clearly in November 1792 when it issued its decree of “Aid and Fraternity.” Essentially a pledge to help any nation in its quest for liberty and equality, the decree externalized the revolutionary vision in a way never before witnessed. The theory behind Bonaparte’s plan to erect sister-republics from the Alps to the Mediterranean foresaw a day when previously downtrodden peoples would rise up and join France in a fraternity of free societies. War was simply one way of carrying the seeds of liberty to distant lands where brotherhood would sprout and flourish.

The nation, the homeland, patriotism, citizenship—all of these terms gained new meaning from the revolutions in America and France. Only in France, however, were liberty, equality, and fraternity combined with citizenship into a potent and expansive force. The revolutionaries of 1789 and those who followed them crafted a new political dynamic within which free citizens served not only their own nation but also the interests of liberty, as they defined them, abroad. A quest had been begun that one nation after another would strive to complete. From Bonaparte’s France to the British Empire to modern America, leaders and their people have worked to export their versions of freedom, justice, and citizenship. A habit of viewing liberty as the inevitable endpoint of all human history had now been acquired. This is perhaps the truest legacy of the French Revolution.

CHRONOLOGY

1789 **May** The Estates-General meets to address the French financial crisis.

June The Third Estate declares itself to be the National Assembly; the Oath of the Tennis Court demands a constitution for France.

July The Bastille falls to a Parisian mob.

August The National Assembly strips the French nobility of its privileges with the August Decrees.

TIMELINE

1789

July The Bastille falls to a Parisian mob.

1789

1790

July The National Assembly passes the Civil Constitution of the Clergy.

1792

1792

April France declares war on Austria and Prussia.

September The National Convention takes power; the French Republic is declared.

December The monarchy is abolished and Louis XVI is put on trial.

- 1790 **July** The National Assembly passes the Civil Constitution of the Clergy.
- 1791 **June** Louis XVI tries unsuccessfully to flee France.
October The Legislative Assembly assumes power.
- 1792 **April** France declares war on Austria and Prussia.
September The National Convention takes power; the French Republic is declared.
December The monarchy is abolished and Louis XVI is put on trial.
- 1793 **January** Louis XVI is guillotined.

1793

January Louis XVI is guillotined.

September The Reign of Terror begins.

October Marie-Antoinette is guillotined.

1793

1799

1794

July Maximilien Robespierre is guillotined; the Reign of Terror ends.

1799

November Napoleon Bonaparte overthrows the Directory and takes control of the new Consulate.

- 1793 **September** The Reign of Terror begins.
 October Marie-Antoinette is guillotined.
- 1794 **July** Maximilien Robespierre is guillotined; the Reign of Terror ends.
- 1795 **October** The National Convention is replaced by the Directory.
- 1799 **November** Napoleon Bonaparte overthrows the Directory during the Coup of 18 Brumaire and takes control of the new Consulate.

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