French Revolution

Introduction

French Revolution, major transformation of the society and political system of France, lasting from 1789 to 1799. During the course of the Revolution, **France was temporarily transformed from an absolute monarchy,** where the king monopolized power, **to a republic of theoretically free and equal citizens.** The effects of the French Revolution were widespread, both inside and outside of France, and the Revolution ranks as one of the most important events in the history of Europe.

During the ten years of the Revolution, **France first transformed and then dismantled the Old Regime, the political and social system that existed in France before 1789, and replaced it with a series of different governments.** Although none of these governments lasted more than four years, the **many initiatives they enacted permanently altered France's political system.** These initiatives included **the drafting of several bills of rights and constitutions, the establishment of legal equality among all citizens, experiments with representative democracy, the incorporation of the church into the state, and the reconstruction of state administration and the law code.**

Many of these changes were adopted elsewhere in Europe as well. Change was a matter of choice in some places, but in others it was imposed by the French army during the French Revolutionary Wars (1792-1797) and the Napoleonic Wars (1799-1815). To later generations of Europeans and non-Europeans who sought to overturn their political and social systems, the French Revolution provided the most influential model of popular insurrection until the Russian Revolution of 1917.

Causes of the Revolution

From the beginning of the 20th century until the 1970s, the French Revolution was most commonly described as the result of the growing economic and social importance of the **bourgeoisie**, or middle class. The bourgeoisie, it was believed, overthrew the Old Regime because that regime had given power and privilege to other classes—the nobility and the clergy—who prevented the bourgeoisie from advancing socially and politically.

Economic recession in the 1770s may have frustrated some bourgeois in their rise to power and wealth, and rising bread prices just before the Revolution certainly increased discontent among workers and peasants. Yet it is now commonly believed that the revolutionary process started with a crisis in the French state.

By 1789 many French people had become critical of the monarchy, even though it had been largely successful in militarily defending France and in quelling domestic religious and political violence.
They resented the rising and unequal taxes, the persecution of religious minorities, and government interference in their private lives. These resentments, coupled with an inefficient government and an antiquated legal system, made the government seem increasingly illegitimate to the French people.
The royal court at Versailles, which had been developed to impress the French people and Europe generally, came to symbolize the waste and corruption of the entire Old Regime.

Parlements and Philosophes

During the 18th century, criticism of the French monarchy also came from people who worked for the Old Regime. Some of the king's own ministers criticized past practices and proposed reforms, but a more influential source of dissent was the *parlements,* 13 regional royal courts led by the Parlement of Paris.

The parlements were empowered to register royal decrees, and all decrees had to be registered by the parlements before becoming law. In this capacity, the parlements frequently protested royal initiatives that they believed to threaten the traditional rights and liberties of the people. In widely distributed publications, they held up the image of a historically free France and denounced the absolute rule of the crown that in their view threatened traditional liberties by imposing religious orthodoxy and new taxes.

During this time, the parlementaires and the philosophes together crafted a vocabulary that would be used later to define and debate political issues during the Revolution. They redefined such terms as *despotism,* or the oppression of a people by an arbitrary ruler; *liberty* and *rights;* and the *nation.*

Fiscal Crisis

The discontent of the French people might not have brought about a political revolution if there had not been a fiscal crisis in the late 1780s. Like so much else in the Old Regime, the monarchy's financial system was inefficient and antiquated.

France had neither a national bank nor a centralized national treasury. The nobility and clergy—many of them very wealthy—paid substantially less in taxes than other groups, notably the much poorer peasantry. Similarly, the amount of tax charged varied widely from one region to another.

Furthermore, the monarchy almost always spent more each year than it collected in taxes; consequently, it was forced to borrow, which it did increasingly during the 18th century. Debt grew in part because France participated in a series of costly wars—the **War of the Austrian Succession** (1740-1748), the **Seven Years' War** (1756-1763), and the **American Revolution** (1775-1783).

Large existing debts and a history of renouncing earlier ones meant that the country was forced to borrow at higher interest rates than some other countries, further adding to the already massive debt.

By 1789 the state was forced to spend nearly half its yearly revenues paying the interest it owed.

Attempts at Reform

Financial reform was attempted before 1789. Upon his accession to the throne in 1774, Louis XVI appointed the reform-minded Anne Robert Jacques Turgot as chief finance minister. Between 1774 and 1776 Turgot sought to cut government expenses and to increase revenues. He removed government restrictions on the sale and distribution of grain in order to increase grain sales and, in turn, government revenue.

But most of these reforms were soon undone as the result of pressure from a variety of financial groups, and the government continued to borrow at high rates of interest through the 1780s.

Charles Alexandre de Calonne was appointed minister of finance in 1783, and three years later he proposed a new general plan resembling Turgot's.

Assembly of Notables and Estates-General

To pressure the parlements into accepting the plan, Calonne decided to gain prior approval of it from an **Assembly of Notables**—a group of hand-picked dignitaries he thought would sympathize with his views. But Calonne had badly miscalculated. Meeting in January 1787, the assembly refused to believe that a financial crisis really existed. They had been influenced by Necker's argument that state finances were sound and suspected that the monarchy was only trying to squeeze more money from the people. They insisted on examining state accounts. Despite a public appeal for support, Calonne was fired and replaced by Loménie de Brienne in April 1787.

Public response to the actions of the king was strong and even violent. People began to ignore royal edicts and assault royal officials, and pamphlets denouncing despotism inundated the country. At the same time, people began to call for an immediate meeting of the **Estates-General** to deal with the crisis.

The Estates-General was a consultative assembly composed of representatives from the three French estates, or legally defined social classes: clergy, nobility, and commoners. It had last been convened in **1614**. Under increasing political pressure and faced with the total collapse of its finances in August 1788, the Old Regime began to unravel. Brienne was dismissed, Necker reinstated, and the Estates-General was called to meet on May 1, 1789.

Beginning of Revolution

Almost immediately contention arose regarding voting procedures in the upcoming Estates-General. In its last meeting, voting had been organized by estate, with each of the three estates meeting separately and each having one vote. In this way the privileged classes had combined to outvote the third estate, which constituted more than 90 percent of the population. In registering the edict to convene the Estates-General, the Parlement of Paris, which had been reinstated by the monarchy on September 23, 1788, ruled in favor of keeping this form of voting. The Parlement probably did this more to prevent the monarchy from potentially exploiting any new voting system to its advantage than to preserve noble privilege.

However, many observers read this decision as a betrayal of the third estate. As a result, a flood of pamphlets appeared demanding a vote by head at the Estates-General—that is, a procedure whereby each deputy was to cast one vote in a single chamber composed of all three estates. This method would give each estate a number of votes that more accurately represented its population and would make it more difficult for the first two estates to routinely outvote the third. Now two battles were being waged at the same time: one to protect the nation's liberty against royal despotism, and the other over how the nation would be represented in the Estates-General.

During the early months of 1789, the three estates prepared for the coming meeting by selecting deputies and drawing up ***cahiers des doléances*** (lists of grievances). These lists reflected overwhelming agreement in favour of limiting the power of the king and his administrators and establishing a permanent legislative assembly. In an effort to satisfy the third estate, the monarchy had agreed to double the number of their representatives but then took no firm stand on whether the voting would proceed by estate or by head.

When the **Estates-General assembled at Versailles in May 1789**, the monarchy proposed no specific financial plan for debate and left the voting issue unsettled. As a result, the estates spent their time engaged in debate of the voting procedure, and little was accomplished.

National Assembly

Five wasted weeks later, the third estate finally took the initiative by inviting the clergy and nobility to join them in a single-chambered legislature where the voting would be by head. Some individual members of the other estates did so, and on June 17, 1789, they together proclaimed themselves to be the National Assembly When officials locked their regular meeting place to prepare it for a royal address, members of the National Assembly concluded their initiative was about to be crushed. Regrouping at a nearby indoor **tennis court** on June 20, they swore not to disband until France had a constitution. This pledge became known as the **Tennis Court Oath**.

Storming of the Bastille

On June 23, 1789, Louis XVI belatedly proposed a major overhaul of the financial system, agreed to seek the consent of the deputies for all new loans and taxes, and proposed other important reforms. But he spoiled the effect by refusing to recognize the transformation of the Estates-General into the National Assembly and by insisting upon voting by estate—already a dying cause. Moreover, he inspired new fears by surrounding the meeting hall of the deputies with a large number of soldiers. Faced with stiffening resistance by the third estate and increasing willingness of deputies from the clergy and nobility to join the third estate in the National Assembly, the king suddenly changed course and agreed to a vote by head on June 27.

Despite much rejoicing, suspicions of the king's intentions ran high. Royal troops began to thicken near Paris, and on July 11 the still-popular Necker was dismissed. To people at the time and to many later on, these developments were clear signs that the king sought to undo the events of the previous weeks.

Crowds began to roam Paris looking for arms to fight off a royal attack. On July 14 these crowds assaulted the **Bastille**, a large fortress on the eastern edge of the city. They believed that it contained munitions and many prisoners of despotism, but in fact, the fortress housed only seven inmates at the time. **The storming of the Bastille marked a turning point**—attempts at reform had become a full-scale revolution. Faced with this insurrection, the monarchy backed down. The troops were withdrawn, and Necker was recalled.

The Moderate Revolution

In the year leading up to the storming of the Bastille, the economic problems of many common people had become steadily worse, largely because poor weather conditions had ruined the harvest. As a result, the price of bread—the most important food of the poorer classes—increased. Tensions and violence grew in both the cities and the countryside during the spring and summer of 1789. While hungry artisans revolted in urban areas, starved peasants scoured the provinces in search of food and work. These vagrants were rumored to be armed agents of landlords hired to destroy crops and harass the common people. Many rural peasants were gripped by a panic, known as the Great Fear. They attacked the residences of their landlords in hopes of protecting local grain supplies and reducing rents on their land.

Both afraid of and politically benefiting from this wave of popular violence, leaders of the revolutionary movement in Paris began to massively restructure the state. On the night of August 4, 1789, one nobleman after another renounced his personal privileges. Before the night was over, the National Assembly declared an end to the feudal system, the traditional system of rights and obligations that had reinforced inherited inequality under the Old Regime. The exact meaning of this resolution as it applied to specific privileges, especially economic ones, took years to sort out. But it provided the legal foundation for gradually scaling back the feudal dues peasants owed to landlords and for eliminating the last vestiges

of *serfdom,* the system that legally bound the peasants to live and work on the landlords' estates.
At the end of August, the National Assembly promulgated the **Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen**. Conceived as the prologue to a new constitution that was not yet drafted, the declaration was a short, concise document ensuring such basic personal rights as those of property, free speech, and personal security. It left unresolved the rights of women and the limits of individual rights in relation to the power of the newly emerging state. But by recognizing the source of sovereignty in the people, it undermined the idea that the king ruled by divine right

Restructuring the State

As these developments unfolded, Louis XVI once again failed to act decisively. The queen, **Marie-Antoinette**, feared catastrophe if events continued on their current course and advocated a hard line. But power was quickly slipping away from the king, as revolutionaries began to organize political clubs and an influential periodical press. Having lost control of events, Louis was forced to yield to them. He gave in so reluctantly—for example, taking months to approve the August 4, 1789, decrees and the Declaration of Rights—that hostility to the crown only increased.
When rumours circulated that guests at a royal banquet had trampled on revolutionary insignia, a crowd of many thousands, most of them women who were also protesting the high cost of bread, marched to Versailles on October 5. They were accompanied by National Guards, commanded by the **Marquis de Lafayette**. The Guards were barely able to prevent wholesale massacre, and the crowd forced the royal family to leave Versailles for Paris, never to return. The king and his family were now, in effect, prisoners, forced to inhabit the Tuilerie Palace along with the National Assembly, which moved there as well. Paris had replaced Versailles as the center of power, and the government was now more vulnerable than ever to the will of the restless, and occasionally violent, people of the city.

Political Change: Constitutional Monarchy

The **National Assembly** next focused on writing a new constitution, a process that took more than two years. Although it was agreed that France would remain a monarchy, the Assembly decided almost immediately that the constitution would not simply reform the old order, as the more moderate deputies wanted. Instead, it transformed the political system of the Old Regime, but preserved the monarchy.
The new constitution was designed to prevent the return of despotism by making all government officials subject to the rule of law. It proclaimed France as a united, sovereign kingdom, dissolved the entire system of royal administration, and adopted a system of federalism that shifted authority from Paris to the localities. France was divided into 83 districts called *departments,* each of which would elect administrators to execute laws, maintain public order, levy taxes, and oversee education and poor relief.
The powers of the national government were divided among separate, independent branches. The chief executive was to be the king, who would continue to inherit his office, but his powers were to be limited, particularly in legislative matters. The king was allowed only a *suspensive veto*, whereby he could at most delay the laws passed by the assembly. As the only law-making body, the single-chambered **Legislative Assembly** was the heart of the state, enjoying wide powers. Although the right to vote was extended to more than half the adult male population—called *active citizens*—election to the assembly was made a complex process. Very restrictive qualifications made only about 50,000 men (out of about 26 million French people) eligible to serve as deputies. Like the administration of the departments, the judiciary was also decentralised. Legal procedure was streamlined, and torture banned.

Social Change: Equal Rights

In addition to reconstituting the state, the National Assembly made many changes to the existing social order. Among the most notable changes were the elimination of the nobility as a legally defined class and the granting of the same civil rights to all citizens; the elimination of guilds and other organizations that monopolized production, controlled prices and wages, or obstructed economic activity through strikes; the extension of rights to blacks in France and to mulattoes in France's Caribbean colonies, though not the outright abolition of slavery; and the granting of full civil rights to religious minorities, including Protestants and Jews.

Religious Change: Civil Constitution of the Clergy

Political and social restructuring on this scale raised complicated issues regarding the Catholic Church. The clergy had enjoyed extensive property rights and special privileges under the Old Regime and had long been a target of criticism. The National Assembly incorporated the church within the state, stripping clerics of their property and special rights. In return, the state assumed the large debts of the church and paid the clergy a salary. Dioceses were redrawn to correspond to departments. A presiding bishop would administer each diocese, with local priests beneath him. Since active citizens would elect the bishops and the priests, a Protestant, Jew, or atheist might be chosen to fill these positions. Finally, the **Civil Constitution of the Clergy** of 1790 required all priests and bishops to swear an oath of loyalty to the new order or face dismissal.

Almost half the parish priests and bishops refused to take the oath. This marked an important turn of events. Before the Civil Constitution, opposition to the Revolution had remained a scattered affair. It had been led by an ineffective group of high nobles called the ***émigrés***, who had fled the country beginning in July 1789 and had been conspiring from abroad ever since. More than anything else, the Civil Constitution and the oath solidified resistance to the Revolution by giving the resistance a religious justification and publicly designating a group of influential individuals—the refractory clergy—as enemies of the new state.

Although there were many reasons for the Civil Constitution, financial considerations were some of the most important. The government's fiscal problems continued well past 1789. The assembly had assumed the Old Regime's debts, but tax collections had been interrupted by administrative disorders and simple refusals to pay. To cover expenditures, the assembly issued bonds, called ***assignats***; then to repay the assignats, it confiscated and sold the church's considerable property holdings. The government justified this practice by saying that church property belonged to the nation.

Growing Factionalism

All these measures were vigorously debated inside and outside the assembly. The assembly had been divided from the start into a conservative right that wanted to limit change and a radical left that wanted major social and political reforms. The assembly therefore lacked a unified voice. As head of state, the king was expected to provide this unifying influence, even if his power was formally limited. However, hopes that the king would step in and fill this role were dashed in June 1791 when the royal family fled Paris in disguise, leaving behind a manifesto denouncing nearly all the Revolution had accomplished since 1789. Poorly planned and executed, the effort ended with the royal family's arrest at the border town of **Varennes**. From there they were returned to Paris under heavy guard, now more prisoners than ever.

Because so much had been expected of the king, the Varennes fiasco proved more of a shock than could be absorbed all at once. In an attempt to recover, assembly leaders announced that the incident had been a case of kidnapping, not an escape, and in mid-July the assembly voted to clear the king of all responsibility for what had happened. But these fictions were hardly convincing, and once they collapsed, so did the likelihood of ending the Revolution and establishing a stable government. On the left, moderate revolutionaries who sought to keep the monarchy, called ***Feuillants***, split from the more radical revolutionaries, known as the

Cordeliers and the ***Jacobins,*** who now began to talk openly about replacing the monarchy with a **republic**.

The king reluctantly approved the new constitution on September 14, 1791. Alarmed by the radical direction the Revolution was taking, more nobles began to cross the border to become émigrés. Pressured by these émigrés and concerned about the potential effects of the Revolution on their own kingdoms, the Austrian emperor and Prussian king issued the **Declaration of Pillnitz** on August 27. In this declaration they announced a rather vague willingness to intervene militarily on behalf of the French monarchy. Unclear as it was, the declaration provoked fears of an invasion.

It was under these threatening circumstances that the new constitution took effect and the **Legislative Assembly** first met on October 1, 1791. At first, the assembly got along remarkably well with the king, but this situation changed when the assembly proposed retaliatory actions against the émigrés and the refractory clergy. On November 9 it passed legislation requiring that the émigrés return to France or face death and the loss of their estates. On November 29 it required the refractory clergy to take the oath to the constitution or fall under state surveillance and lose their pension rights.

Radical Revolution

The émigrés and their efforts to mobilize foreign powers against France created the pretext for France's entry into war in April 1792. In reality, Austria and Prussia had shown little interest in intervention on behalf of the French king. However, radical political figures, most notably **Jacques Pierre Brissot**, persistently exaggerated the threat of an Austrian invasion of France and the subversion of the revolutionary government by a conspiracy of Austrian sympathizers called the Austrian Committee. Expecting that a conflict with Austria would weaken the king to their political advantage, Brissot and his colleagues pressed for a declaration of war. Many of the king's advisors, though at first not the king himself, also advocated the war option. They believed a victory would strengthen royal power and a defeat would crush the Revolution. Persuaded, the king appointed a ministry dominated by Brissot's associates on March 10, 1792, and on April 20 the assembly declared war on Austria, which was soon joined by Prussia. Thus began the series of conflicts known as the French Revolutionary Wars.

End of the Monarchy

The wars profoundly altered the course of the Revolution, leading to the end of the monarchy and raising fears of reprisals against the revolutionaries in the event of a defeat. The French had few successes on the battlefield. The French army was in the middle of a major reorganization and was not prepared for war. In addition, Brissot's ministry proved incompetent and disorganized. During the spring of 1792, the French army lurched from defeat to defeat. Someone, it seemed, was to blame; and the Brissot faction blamed the king, who in turn fired the Brissotin ministers on June 13.

On June 20 a **mob**, alarmed at the worsening military situation and rising bread prices caused by the declining value of the assignats, stormed the **Tuilerie Palace**. Coached by the Brissotins, the mob demanded that the king reinstate the Brissotin ministers. Louis courageously refused to do so. But military disasters continued during the summer, and the political situation deteriorated further when a Prussian commander, the duke of Brunswick, issued a manifesto in which he threatened to execute anyone who harmed the royal family.

On August 10 a crowd again stormed the Tuilerie Palace in the Revolution's bloodiest eruption to date. This time, however, the mob was not allied with the Brissotins, who still favored a monarchy. Instead it supported the more radical Jacobins who, under the leadership of the lawyer **Maximilien Robespierre**, now demanded the creation of a republic. While the royal family hid in the Assembly hall, the mob hacked to death some 600 Swiss guards, while itself suffering heavy losses. More than lives were lost; so was the monarchy. The Legislative Assembly immediately suspended the king from his duties and voted to hold a convention. The convention, to be elected by nearly universal manhood suffrage, was to write a new, republican constitution.

First French Republic

Between August 10, 1792, and the meeting of the convention on September 20, revolutionary furour grew. Power shifted from the Legislative Assembly, now a lame duck, to the **Paris Commune.** The Commune was a city assembly made up of representatives elected from 48 neighborhood districts called sections. Because nearly universal male suffrage had taken effect on August 10, the sections and the Commune became increasingly dominated by the ***sans-culottes,*** a group composed mostly of artisans and shopkeepers fiercely devoted to the Revolution and direct democracy.

In this unstable period, **Georges Jacques Danton**, who had probably helped organize the massacre of August 10, became a dominating political figure. Danton, who was appointed minister of justice by the assembly, encouraged fears that counter-revolutionary forces loyal to the king were undermining the Revolution. He used these fears to promote further measures against counter-revolutionaries. On August 17 a special court was created to try political suspects, but it did not convict enough defendants to satisfy the sans-culottes.

Fearing military defeat and believing that counter-revolutionary prisoners were about to break out and attack patriots like themselves, **sans-culotte mobs attacked Parisian jails** from September 2 to 7. They murdered and mutilated more than 1000 inmates—most of whom were guilty of nothing more than having enjoyed some privilege or committing ordinary crimes. These **September Massacres** were so gruesome that no revolutionary leader, not even those with bloody agendas of their own, claimed responsibility for them.

The National Convention

The **National Convention** first met on September 20, 1792, the same day the French army won a major victory against Prussian forces at Valmy in north-eastern France. The convention was composed of three major political groups: **the Jacobins**, a fairly well disciplined radical minority; the **former Brissotins**, now called ***Girondins,*** a less disciplined group of moderates; and **a large group of individuals called the *Plain*** who were not associated with either party. On September 21 the convention voted to establish a republic in place of the monarchy. The founding of the first French Republic represented so important a milestone that, when the convention adopted a new revolutionary calendar, it made **September 22, 1792, the first day of Year I**.

The convention took much longer to decide the fate of the king, who was now imprisoned with the royal family in an old fort just outside Paris. The more moderate Girondins maneuvered to keep Louis a prisoner. The Jacobins, who were allied with the sans-culottes, argued that the people had already judged Louis guilty of treason when they had stormed the palace on August 10. The convention compromised, deciding that it would try the king.

On January 15 the convention overwhelmingly found Louis guilty, and then voted (by a margin of one vote) for immediate execution. Louis was executed on the new invention for beheading called the ***guillotine*** on January 21, 1793, protesting his innocence. If ever there was a point of no return in the Revolution, this was it, for enemies of the Revolution now sought to avenge the king's death more vigorously than they had tried to preserve his life.

Executing the king did little to solve the convention's other problems, the main one being the war. **The Convention declared war on Britain and the Netherlands** in early February and on **Spain** in March, thus adding to France's military burdens. The French forces were on the defensive through most of 1793, and in April France was stunned by the desertion of one of its chief commanders, General Dumouriez, to the Austrians. Facing loss after loss, the convention voted to raise an army of 300,000 men. It sought volunteers, but instituted a draft to provide additional soldiers. The draft touched off rebellion in western rural areas, notably Brittany and the Vendée. Many people in these areas already opposed the Revolution because of the church reorganization and the clerical oath. Pacifying them would take years and cost an estimated 100,000 lives.

Revolts also occurred in other areas, particularly the large cities. These revolts protested the domination of the local affairs by Paris and the Jacobins. Local elites favored ***federalism,*** a

policy that would have allowed them to maintain power over their own regions. Meanwhile, prices rose because of a poor harvest and the declining value of the assignats, which fell to half their stated value in January and then fell further. Higher bread prices led the sans-culottes and associated women's groups to demand state-imposed price controls, a demand that the Jacobins could not refuse because they depended on the political support of the sans-culottes. In May the Convention fixed maximum prices for grain and bread.

Reign of Terror

In this general crisis, revolutionary leaders began to turn on each other. The Girondins, who favored federalism, fought a battle to the death with the Jacobins, who denounced the Girondins for lacking revolutionary zeal and for aiding, intentionally or not, counter-revolutionary forces. The Jacobins already dominated the convention, but on June 2, pressured by the sans-culottes, they consolidated their power by arresting 22 Girondin leaders.

During the following months, the government put down the federalist revolts, sometimes with great severity. A new democratic constitution was drawn up but never implemented: In **Robespierre's** view, constitutional government would have to wait until fear and repression had eliminated the enemies of the Revolution. The Jacobins operated through the existing convention and agencies responsible to it. They used the **Committee of Public Safety**, composed of **12 men led by Robespierre,** to provide executive oversight; the **Committee of General Security,** to **oversee the police**; and the **Revolutionary Tribunal** to try **political cases**. Additionally, the Jacobins sent representatives from the convention with wide-ranging powers to particular areas to enforce Jacobin policies.

The most urgent government business was the war. On August 17, 1793, the convention voted the ***levée en masse*** **(mass conscription),** which mobilized all citizens to serve as soldiers or suppliers in the war effort. To further that effort, the convention quickly enacted more legislation. On September 5 it approved the **Reign of Terror**, a policy through which the state used violence to crush resistance to the government. On September 9 the convention established **sans-culotte paramilitary forces**, the so-called revolutionary armies, to force farmers to surrender grain demanded by the government. On September 17 the **Law of Suspects** was passed, which authorized the charging of counter-revolutionaries with vaguely defined "crimes against liberty." On September 29 the convention **extended price-fixing** from grain and bread to other essential goods and fixed wages. On December 4 the national government resumed oversight of local administration. On February 4, 1794, it **abolished slavery in the colonies.**

Beyond these measures, the convention and sympathetic groups like the sans-culottes began to create and spread a revolutionary and republican culture. These groups sponsored the use of revolutionary and republican propaganda in the arts, public festivals, and modes of dress. In this way, they gradually began to spread and gain acceptance for their ideals among the common people.

The most notable achievement of the Reign of Terror was to save the revolutionary government from military defeat. The government feared invasion, which might have allowed counter-revolutionary forces to undertake a terror of their own. To preserve the Revolution, it reorganized and strengthened the army. The Jacobins expanded the size of the army and replaced many aristocratic officers, who had deserted and fled abroad, with younger soldiers who had demonstrated their ability and patriotism. **The revolutionary army threw back the Austrians, Prussians, English, and Spanish during the fall of 1793 and expelled the Austrians from Belgium by the summer of 1794.**

The military success of the Jacobin-led government was undeniable. However, the repressive policies of the Reign of Terror that enabled the government to form and equip its large army did so at the expense of many French citizens' security: about **250,000 people were arrested**; **17,000 were tried and guillotined**, many with little if any means to defend themselves; **another 12,000 were executed without trial**; and **thousands more died in jail. Clergy and nobles composed only 15 percent of the Reign of Terror's approximately 40,000 victims**. The rest were peasants and bourgeois who had fought against the Revolution or had said or done something to offend the new order. The Reign of

Terror executed not only figures from the Old Regime, like the former queen Marie-Antoinette, but also many revolutionary leaders. Some victims of the Reign of Terror, like Georges Danton, seemed too moderate to Robespierre and his colleagues, while others, like the sans-culotte leader Jacques René Hébert, seemed too extreme.
The Reign of Terror was the most radical phase of the Revolution, and it remains the most controversial. Some have seen the Reign of Terror as a major advance toward modern **democracy**, while others call it a step toward modern dictatorship. Certain defenders of the Revolution have argued that the Reign of Terror was, under the circumstances, a reasonable response to the military crisis of 1793. Others have rejected this idea, pointing out that the military victories of early 1794, far from diminishing the intensity of the Reign of Terror, were followed by the **Great Terror of June and July 1794**, in which more than **1300 people were executed in Paris alone**. The Reign of Terror, they have argued, resulted from an ideology already in place by 1789 that **put national good above personal rights**. To this argument, others have replied that in 1789 no revolutionary leader seriously imagined establishing anything like the Reign of Terror.

Search for Balance

The Jacobin government lasted barely a year. Although effective in the short term, in the long run it destroyed itself—in part because no one really controlled it. Victory on the battlefield had removed the pretext for maintaining the Reign of Terror. **At the same time, the killing frenzy of the Great Terror convinced people—even allies of the Jacobins—they might be next on the guillotine**. Furthermore, by killing off the likes of Danton and Hébert, Robespierre's faction had narrowed its base of support and had no one to lean on when challenged. Thus the end was simply a matter of time.

The Thermidorean Reaction

As it happened, **the coup against Robespierre and his associates was led by a group of dissident Jacobins, including members of the Committee of Public Safety**. They had supported the Reign of Terror but feared Robespierre would turn on them next. On July 27, 1794 (9 Thermidor, Year II, in the revolutionary calendar), **Robespierre and his close followers were arrested on the convention floor. During the next two days, Robespierre and 82 of his associates were guillotined.**
Although the conspirators of 9 Thermidor, who came to be known as *Thermidoreans,* could hardly have known it, the removal of the 83 Robespierrists represented a major turning point in the Revolution. Ever since 1789, counter-revolutionaries, who enjoyed support from many peasants, had tried to reverse the Revolution. But it had continued to become more and more extreme in nature, due to the increasing participation of urban radicals with whom the Jacobins had formed political alliances. Only after 9 Thermidor did the Revolution reverse its radical direction, and **more moderate politicians came to dominate the government**.
While these moderates wanted to preserve the Revolution's achievements and tried to repress counter-revolutionaries, they also feared and repressed the radical groups on whose backs the Jacobins had ridden to power. **In order to maintain control over both the radical left and the counter-revolutionary right, the Thermidoreans consolidated their power and began to limit democracy. These limitations led eventually to the dictatorship of Napoleon Bonaparte**.
Immediately after 9 Thermidor an assortment of political groups began to use their influence to dismantle all vestiges of the Reign of Terror. Although the convention continued in power until October 1795, the teeth of the Reign of Terror were pulled one by one. To limit their power, the committees of Public Safety and General Security were restructured; the operations of the Revolutionary Tribunal were curtailed; thousands of prisoners were released; and in November 1794 the Paris Jacobin club was closed. People associated with the Reign of Terror were harassed in Paris by reactionary youth groups known as the *jeunesse d'orée* (French for "the gilded youth") and even killed in strongly counter-revolutionary regions.

The last major popular rising of the Revolution occurred in the Spring of 1795, when the near-total devaluation of the assignats produced a price rise that devastated the poor. But this rising was put down so effectively that the counter-revolutionaries imagined the monarchy might soon be restored, and their activities escalated. In response, the Thermidoreans now struck against the counter-revolutionaries, defeating and executing a group of émigré soldiers landed by the English at Quiberon Bay in Brittany during the summer of 1795.

The Directory

To avoid a revival of either democracy or dictatorship, the Thermidoreans put together and ratified a new constitution that **limited the right to vote to the wealthiest 30,000 male citizens and dispersed power among three main bodies. Legislative authority was vested in two legislative assemblies, the Council of Ancients and the Council of Five Hundred. Executive power was lodged in a five-man Directory to be chosen by the Council of Ancients from a list of candidates presented by the Council of Five Hundred.**

Fearing the results of a true referendum, moderate republicans decreed that two-thirds of the first legislature had to be made up of members of the former convention. As it turned out, the constitution, which was ratified by popular vote and took effect in late October 1795, neither protected the government from unfriendly popular forces nor prevented the concentration of power.

Did the Directory have good reason to fear that open elections would bring down the republic? Historians have disagreed on this matter. Some argue that the Directory eventually failed because it could not generate loyalty from either the left or the right. Other historians believe the Directory failed because it distrusted democracy and did not develop a strong centrist party.

Whatever the reason, for the next four years the Directory lurched from making concessions to the right and intimidating the left to making concessions to the left and intimidating the right. In May 1796 the Directory easily crushed a conspiracy of former Jacobins and agrarian radicals who intended to seize power and redistribute property. The right triumphed at the elections in 1797 and was slowly preparing to take power. Then in September, three members of the Directory, the ***triumvirate,*** eliminated the two other members who had counter-revolutionary sympathies and purged the legislature of nearly 200 opposition deputies. They did all this with the backing of the army. The triumvirate was then joined by two new associates. This new Directory proceeded to close down counter-revolutionary publications, exile returning émigrés and uncooperative clergy, and execute many political opponents.

This coup of **Fructidor** (the month of the revolutionary calendar in which it occurred) allowed the Directory to consolidate its power. As a result, it was able to take some bold new financial initiatives, such as establishing a new metal-based currency and imposing a new system of taxes on luxury goods and real estate. The coup also destroyed whatever hopes counter-revolutionaries had to gain power through legal means.

But Fructidor also unleashed the radical left, which won an important electoral victory in May 1798. To neutralize this threat, the Directory once again tampered with polling results by eliminating more than 100 elected left-wing deputies in what became known as the **Coup of Floréal.** Whatever the short-term gains for the Directory, its continuing rejection of election results stripped it of its last remaining shreds of authority, as few could respect a regime that so routinely violated its own constitution.

Foundations of Dictatorship

The end came in 1799. Military reverses, a domestic political crisis, and the ambitions of a military hero, Napoleon Bonaparte, combined to give rise to the Revolution's last major coup and the creation of a dictatorship.

The military reverses occurred after French armies had enjoyed five years of considerable success. Following the victories of the Reign of Terror, the first coalition of European powers

fighting revolutionary France crumbled in 1795 and 1796. **Prussia, Spain, the Dutch Netherlands, and Tuscany (Toscana) signed peace treaties with France, leaving England and Austria to fight alone. In October 1795 France annexed the Austrian Netherlands** (now Belgium). **The Dutch Netherlands became the first of many so-called French sister republics. France fitted it with a new, relatively democratic constitution closely patterned on the Directory. France also forced the Dutch Netherlands to pay it a large indemnity. In 1796 and 1797 French armies swept into Italy and western Germany.**

Napoleon

It was in the course of the Italian campaign that **Napoleon Bonaparte** first made himself known to the general public. Born in 1769 to a poor but noble Corsican family, Bonaparte was trained as an artillery officer and quickly advanced through the ranks during the early years of the Revolution. A Jacobin associate during the Reign of Terror, Bonaparte was briefly imprisoned after Thermidor, but once released, he made himself useful to the new Directory by crushing a counter-revolutionary uprising in October 1795. As commander of French forces in Italy, he won a series of brilliant victories, established a new north Italian sister republic called the **Cisalpine Republic**, and in October 1797 negotiated a treaty with Austria of his own design.

With a number of important secret provisions that ceded almost two-thirds of Austrian territory along the Rhine River to France, this **Treaty of Campo Formio** so expanded the French sphere of influence that it did less to create peace than to provoke a new war. Imagining themselves to be liberating Europe, French forces proceeded to impose new political arrangements in western Germany; to establish additional sister republics in Switzerland and Italy; to assist, unsuccessfully, an Irish revolt against England; and to send an army under Bonaparte to Egypt to attack the Ottoman Empire. Successful at first in Egypt, the French army was isolated after the English navy won a victory at **Abū Qīr Bay** in August 1798, whereupon Bonaparte left his troops and returned to France. He was welcomed as a great hero despite his failure to capture Egypt and his loss to the English.

End of the Directory

Perceiving in the French position both weakness and a continuing threat, England, Russia, the Ottoman Empire, and Austria formed a new anti-French coalition. By the spring of 1799 the armies of this second coalition forced France to retreat on all fronts, most dramatically in Italy where they dislodged the French altogether and dismantled the sister republics. Although the coalition was pushed back in September and began to disintegrate, the French military position remained uncertain. Suddenly on the defensive and rudely reminded of their vulnerability, the French nation lost still more respect for the Directory. Gradually during 1799 the Directory lost its political grip.

As the military situation darkened and **Austria threatened France**, opponents of the Directory won an election and, for once, were able to purge the Directory, rather than vice versa. The purge enabled newly elected deputies to take radical measures to advance the war effort. They imposed forced loans on the wealthy and persecuted the relatives of émigrés, recalling the Reign of Terror. The primary beneficiary of the purge, however, was **Emmanuel Sieyès**, who was appointed director. He began plotting to radically revise the constitution to protect the regime from any further threats from the radical left or the counter-revolutionary right. Needing a charismatic, popular figure to lead the charge, Sieyès joined forces with Bonaparte.

At this point, fresh counter-revolutionary uprisings occurred in the provinces and a radical movement to take over the republic became apparent. The plotters then persuaded members of the Directory to resign. On November 9 (18 Brumaire) they asked the legislature to vest power in a provisional government made up of Sieyès, Bonaparte, and Roger Ducos. When the legislature resisted, soldiers loyal to Bonaparte chased resistors from the legislature and persuaded the remaining deputies to approve the plan.

The Directory was dead, and with it went the last revolutionary regime that could make any pretense to embody the liberal parliamentary government intended by the revolutionaries of 1789. **Under Bonaparte, the Revolution, if it could be said to have remained alive at all, did so in the form of a military dictatorship that had far more power than any French king had ever possessed.**

The Ambiguous Legacy of the Revolution

At its core, **the French Revolution was a political movement devoted to liberty**. But what that liberty actually was and what was required to realize it remained open questions during the Revolution, as they have ever since. Some historians have suggested that what the revolutionaries' liberty meant in practice was violence and a loss of personal security that pointed to the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century. This negative view had its roots in the ideas of many counter-revolutionaries, who criticized the Revolution from its beginning. These ideas gained new popularity during the period of reaction that set in after Napoleon's final defeat in 1815, when the monarchy and its counter-revolutionary allies were restored to power.

However, the majority of Europeans and non-Europeans came to see the Revolution as much more than a bloody tragedy. These people were more impressed by what the Revolution accomplished than by what it failed to do. They recalled **the Revolution's abolition of serfdom, slavery, inherited privilege, and judicial torture; its experiments with democracy; and its opening of opportunities to those who, for reasons of social status or religion, had been traditionally excluded.**

One of the most important contributions of **the French Revolution was to make revolution part of the world's political tradition.** The French Revolution continued to provide instruction for revolutionaries in the 19th and 20th centuries, as peoples in Europe and around the world sought to realize their different versions of freedom. Karl Marx would, at least at the outset, pattern his notion of a proletarian revolution on the French Revolution of 1789. And 200 years later Chinese students, who weeks before had fought their government in Tiananmen Square, confirmed the contemporary relevance of the French Revolution when they led the revolutionary bicentennial parade in Paris on July 14, 1989.

Along with offering lessons about liberty and democracy, the Revolution also promoted nationalism. Napoleon's occupation provoked nationalist groups to organize in Italy and Germany. Also influential was the revolutionaries' belief that a nation was not a group of royal subjects but a society of equal citizens. **The fact that most European countries are or are becoming parliamentary democracies, along the lines set out by the French Revolution, suggests its enduring influence.**

Socially, the Revolution was also important. Clearly, society in France and to a lesser extent in other parts of Europe would never be the same. **Once the ancient structure of privilege was smashed, it could not be pieced together again**. The Revolution did not fundamentally alter the distribution of wealth, but that had not been the intention of most of the revolutionaries. Insofar as legal equality gradually became the norm in France and Europe, the revolutionaries succeeded.

The **cultural impact** is harder to assess. The Revolution did not succeed in establishing the national school system it envisioned, but it did found some of France's elite educational institutions that have produced some of that nation's greatest leaders. Its attack on the church had profound repercussions, making the status of the church a central political issue, which even today divides France politically and culturally.

As for **economic development**, the Revolution probably hurt more than it helped. In the long term, **the liberation of the economy from royal controls, the standardization of weights and measures, and the development of a uniform civil law code helped pave the way for the Industrial Revolution.** But **the disruptive effects of war on the French economy offset the positive effects of these changes. In terms of total output, the economy was probably set back a generation.**