

## French Revolution

French Revolution, one of the major revolutions in European history. The revolution marks a turning point in France history and in world history in general. Forms of government, morals, ideologies, and social development were greatly affected by it in all Europe and even in U.S.

The beginning of the France Revolution in generally dated from June, 1789. But the crisis in political and economic affairs in France in that period was so great that social unrest, rioting, a and rebellion were common for two years before. The end of the revolutionary period was marked by the establishment of the Empire by Napoleon in 1804.

The basic causes of the French Revolution were rooted in the rigidities of French society in the 18th century. Lines of distinction between classes were tightly drawn, and opportunities for social advancement were very few. The economy was not growing as fast as it should have been. Then needs of an increasing population were not being met. Government was inefficient and unrepresentative. Economic problems made the heavy tax exempt but nearly so, while the peasants and middle classes were subjected to greater and greater burdens. Crops failed, and trade was stagnant. The people could no longer be taxed, but the government faced bankruptcy unless new revenues were found. The only solution was to tax the privileged classes. But they were jealous of their privileged position. Although they were not completely unwilling to contribute some additional taxes, they never understood how grave the economic crisis was. They saw the crisis as only some form of financial corruption that could be explained away by firing the king's finance ministers. The liberal ideas of the French Enlightenment had been absorbed by some of the clergy and the nobility but only by a very few. The upper classes in France in 1789 were more jealous of their privileges than they had been at any time in the 100 years before.

When the French aided the Americans during the American Revolution, they only sent men and ships and guns but lent substantial financial aid as well. As a result, the budget of the French government was thrown out of balance. When economic depression in France made the every growing debt even greater, the state seemed on the verge of bankruptcy. It was necessary to vote new taxes.

The king's power was not as absolute as he pretended it was, and no new taxes could be decreed unless the king's edicts were registered in the district courts, the parliaments. Their members were mostly members of the privileged classes and were always ready to oppose the king's measures. Because of their continual refusal to register tax and reform edicts, it was necessary for the king, Louis XVI, to find some other way of legalizing his edicts

France had never had a parliament exactly like the British, but it had a similar institution called the States-General. Unlike the British institution it met very frequently. The last one had met in 1616. The States-General was called, and it convened in May, 1789.

The States-General was composed of three houses, or estates, called the first, second, and third estates. The first represented the clergy; the second, the nobility; and the third, the middle classes. The third estate contained as many members as the first and second combined.

When the estates met, the third estate wished to vote with the first two houses. The clergy and nobility and the king insisted the houses vote separately. But the third decided that it was more representative of the French people than the other two estates and that it was not fair to allow the first two estates so much power. On June 17, 1789, they converted themselves into a National Assembly, or Constituent Assembly, and resolved to draw up a new constitution for France. The king closed down the hall, but the members went to a nearby tennis court and there took an oath (June 20) not to disband until a constitution was written. The pressure of public opinion was so much in their favor that Louis XVI was forced to recognize them, as he did by the end of the month.

Bad crops and famine conditions contributed to the unrest. During July there were spontaneous peasant uprisings all over France. On July 14 a Paris mob stormed and demolished the Bastille, an old fortress housing political prisoners. On August 4, the assembly, led by certain enlightened nobles, abolished feudal rights and privileges with compensation to owners. A few years later the compensation was also abolished. On August 27 a Declaration of the Rights of Man, similar to the American Bill of Rights, was issued. The new constitution was completed by July, 1790, and the king accepted it. But Louis XVI's behavior was never consistent. In July, 1791, he tried to flee the country in order to reconquer it with the aid of Austrian and Prussian armies. He was caught, however, and popular feeling ran against him. He now accepted a revised constitution, in September, 1791, and the assembly dissolved. A legislative assembly was elected, and it met from October, 1791, to September, 1792.

The legislative assembly was dominated by the Girondists, who wished to set up a federal republic. When the war broke out with Austria in April, 1792, there was no longer any reason for tolerating Louis XVI. He had plotted with his wife's family, which ruled Austria, and was now an enemy of the state.

The National Convention, which reigned from September, 1791, to October, 1795, was the government of the Reign of Terror. It was the one that executed the king in January, 1793. The convention was ruled by two committees under the domination of Robespierre from 1793 to 1794. Robespierre saw to the execution of his enemies and was rampant, war

was at the doorstep, and bread riots were common. The tide turned in another direction, and a stronger executive power in the form of the Directory (1795-1799) was set up. A five-man committee ruled the country. Meanwhile, Napoleon was making his name famous by his military success. Napoleon allied with two directors in the Directory and with his brother Lucien, who was president of the Council of Five Hundred, and assembly under the Directory. On Nov. 9, 1799, in the Coup d'Etat de Brumaire he overthrew the government. A form of government modeled on the old Roman type was set up. Napoleon was elected first consul for ten years. By 1804 Napoleon assumed the title of emperor, and absolute monarchy was revived.

#### Bibliography

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