

FRENCH REVOLUTION.

The French people overthrew their ancient government in 1789. They took as their slogan the famous phrase "Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité"-- **Liberty, Equality, Fraternity**. Equality, or doing away with privilege, was the most important part of the slogan to the French revolutionists. For equality they were willing to sacrifice their political liberty. They did this when they accepted the rule of Napoleon I. Fraternity, or brotherhood with all men, was also sacrificed. However, they did win equality before the law.

Why the French Wanted Equality

The French had good reasons for wanting equality. Before 1789 inequality was typical of the old government. The nobles and clergy were the privileged orders. They were exempt from such direct taxes as the *taille*, or land tax. Most taxes were paid by the Third Estate--a class that included peasants, artisans, merchants, and professional men. Even among these groups taxes were not equal. Some provinces were exempt from certain assessments, such as the *gabelle*, or salt tax. In addition, the collection of some taxes was made by contractors or tax farmers, and the tax gatherers collected whatever they could.

Other Inequalities

There were social and economic inequalities as well as political ones. The peasant suffered under the burden of out-of-date feudal dues. These were collected with renewed vigor by the nobles in the latter part of the 18th century. Rabbits might destroy the peasant's garden and pigeons eat his grain, but he must not kill them. They were protected for the lord's hunting. The peasant's fences were broken down and his crops trampled in the chase, but he could claim no damages. In addition to the dues to the king and the nobles, the peasants had to pay dues to the church. These and other obligations seemed senseless and unreasonable in an age when people were coming to believe in the rule of reason.

The conditions were no worse in the latter part of the 18th century than they had been earlier. Neither were they as bad in France as in some other parts of Europe. Now, however, the people were beginning to think. The writers of the time helped stir up thought and discontent.

Final Steps Before the Revolution

At last the day of reckoning came. The national treasury had been exhausted by the wars of Louis XIV and by his extravagance and that of his successors. The 250 million dollars that it cost France to aid the Americans in their fight for independence was the last straw. Jacques Turgot and



Jacques Necker, ministers of finance, had tried to ward off bankruptcy by cutting court expenses. The reckless court, led by the sprightly, frivolous, extravagant queen, Marie Antoinette, would not listen to the word "economy" (see [Marie Antoinette](#)). Turgot and Necker were dismissed and other ministers took their place. Finally foreign bankers refused to lend more money. Public opinion was deeply stirred by the Parlement of Paris, a judicial body which defied the king and refused to enforce new taxes.

In 1788 Louis XVI, as a last resort, called a meeting of the Estates-General (see [Estates-General](#); [Louis, Kings of France](#)). The three estates were the nobles, the clergy, and the common people. Their representatives met at Versailles, a suburb of Paris, early in May 1789. Reforms and a constitution were demanded at this meeting.

The Revolution

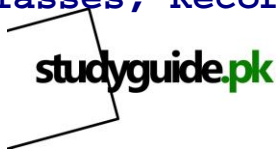
With the meeting of the Estates-General on May 5, 1789, the Revolution began. The representatives of the Third Estate led the way. Some of the nobles and many of the clergy joined with them. They changed the name of the gathering from Estates-General, which represented classes, to National Assembly, which represented the people of France. When the king shut them out from their usual place of meeting, they took the famous *Oath of the Tennis Court (June 20, 1789), pledging themselves not to separate until they had given France a constitution.* When the king sent a messenger to remove them from their hall, the fiery Mirabeau cried out: "Go tell your master that we are here by the will of the people, and that we shall be removed only at the point of the bayonet." (See also [Mirabeau](#).)

Paris, 11 miles away, was alarmed by rumors of the troops gathering about Versailles. A Paris mob stormed and captured the old royal prison in Paris, called *the Bastille, on July 14*. Here for generations kings and ministers had imprisoned men and women at will. Soon after, its thick walls were torn down. The date of its capture became a French national holiday. When the king was told what had taken place he exclaimed: "Why, this is a revolt!" "No, sire," was the reply, "it is a revolution."

After the fall of the Bastille a revolutionary committee of middle-class citizens governed Paris. A national guard composed mainly of citizens was organized. It was commanded by General Lafayette (see [Lafayette](#)). Then the provinces followed the lead of Paris and formed revolutionary governments. The peasants in many places burned the castles of the lords in order to destroy the papers which contained the records of the lords' manorial rights. There was anarchy in many country districts.

Nobles Give Up Their "Privileges"

A report of the peasant outbreaks made a strong impression on the



Assembly. Some liberal nobles in that body set the example of giving up their feudal rights. Amid the wildest enthusiasm, men weeping and embracing each other, one noble after another gave up some exclusive privilege. Finally a decree was passed which aimed at abolishing the entire feudal system. That wild night of **Aug. 4, 1789**, marked the beginning of equality. Remnants of feudal dues, however, kept the peasants uneasy until 1793.

Meanwhile work continued on the constitution which the Assembly had promised to prepare for France. It was finally finished in 1791. Nobility was abolished. France was made a limited monarchy, with a one-house legislature. The immortal part of the document was the **Declaration of the Rights of Man**. It included the following points:

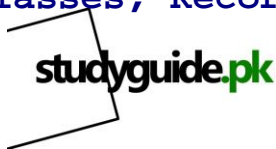
1. All men were born free with equal rights.
2. All citizens have the right to take part in electing representatives to make the laws.
3. Every person shall be free to speak, write, or print his opinions provided he does not abuse this privilege.
4. The amount of taxes which a person is called upon to pay shall be based on the amount of wealth that he possesses.

The Declaration of the Rights of Man came to be regarded as the charter of democracy. The equality of all men in the eyes of the law is its essence. Property was inviolable, for the chief supporters of the new order owned property or desired to own it.

The King Wavers

Louis XVI was a weak and indecisive king. At first he did promise to obey the constitution which had been instituted in 1791, though it placed a narrow limit on his power. Later, however, he listened to evil counselors and changed his mind.

Many nobles had fled before the Revolution broke. These *émigrés*, as they were called, later headed by the king's own brothers, were in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. They were appealing to the princes of Europe to stop the Revolution in France and threatening a reign of bloodshed when they returned. The people of France mistrusted the king and still more mistrusted Marie Antoinette, "the Austrian woman." In October 1789 a mob had brought them--and the Assembly with them--from Versailles to Paris so that they might be more closely watched.



Overthrow of the Monarchy

In June 1791 the suspicions against Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette became certainties for most of the people when the king and queen, with their children, tried to escape. They were captured at Varennes, on the edge of the Argonne, before they reached the French border. They were brought back to Paris. From that day the monarchy was doomed.

These events helped divide the revolutionists into two parties, the Constitutional Royalists and the Republicans. The new Legislative Assembly, which met as soon as the king had accepted the constitution (September 1791), still wanted to keep the monarchy. The Republican sentiment, however, increased rapidly as the king's weakness became more apparent.

On Aug. 10, 1792, a mob invaded the Tuileries and killed the guards. The royal family sought refuge in the hall of the Legislative Assembly. **On Sept. 21, 1792, a decree was passed that "royalty is abolished in France," and a republic was proclaimed. Four months later Louis XVI was sent to the guillotine.** This was a beheading machine named for the physician whose recommendation brought it into use.

The Clergy Oppose the Revolution

The overthrow of the monarchy was not entirely due to the weakness of the king. Affairs generally in France seemed to be going from bad to worse. The clergy and many devout Roman Catholics had withdrawn their support from the Revolution because of the laws against the church.

First of all, the church property had been taken by the state. This was a financial measure and generally approved. Then the "Civil Constitution of the Clergy" was drawn up, according to which all clergy from bishops to parish priests were to be elected and all were required to take an oath to support the government. The lower clergy drew back, and only four bishops took the oath. By a blunder the Assembly had divided the patriots, who had supported all changes up to this point.

Others, especially merchants and tradesmen, were irritated by the paper money (*assignats*) with which the country was flooded and which soon became worthless. Royalist uprisings were occurring in some provinces, as in the Vendée. At the same time that these dangers were threatening the Revolution within the country, Austria and Prussia, having finished the partition of Poland, were allied against the new order in France, which threatened the old order everywhere in Europe. England was drawn into the war when the French revolutionary armies occupied the Austrian Netherlands (Belgium).

To guide the Revolution through this crisis, a strong government was needed. For this the people sacrificed liberty. A convention was called to



draw up a new constitution, and for three years (1792-95) a committee of this assembly, **the Committee of Public Safety, ruled France** while the constitution was set aside. The power of this committee did not come from the Convention, but from the radical **Jacobin Club**. Its members in the Convention were known as the Mountain, from the high seats they occupied in the Legislative Assembly hall (*see Jacobins*).

The men in power were Georges-Jacques Danton, Jean-Paul Marat, and Maximilien Robespierre until Marat was assassinated by Charlotte Corday. **Through agents and spies and "deputies on mission" the Committee spread its net over the whole country. It maintained its position by terror. Hence the period is known as the Reign of Terror.** Royalist uprisings were sternly put down, and thousands were sent to the guillotine. Marie Antoinette, Madame Roland, aristocrats and tradesmen, atheists such as Jacques René Hébert, and even Danton (because he urged moderation) were executed, usually with a mock trial or none at all. (*See also Danton; Marat; Robespierre; Marie Antoinette; Roland, Madame.*)

Old institutions were changed. The calendar was made over, 1792 becoming the Year I, the first year of the French Republic. Even the names of the months were changed.

The Terror accomplished what it set out to do. The Prussian-Austrian invaders had been turned back at Valmy on Sept. 20, 1792. Then the French armies carried the war across the borders. "All governments are our enemies," cried an orator of the Convention, "all peoples are our friends." Belgium, Nice, and Savoy were added to France. Under Lazare Nicolas Carnot, called the "organizer of victory," 14 armies were put in the field. The cry went up for the natural frontiers of France; and the revolutionary regime was going back to the policies of Louis XIV.

The Downfall of Robespierre

Finally the enemies of the Revolution at home and abroad seemed to be suppressed. Only Great Britain and Austria continued the war. The people were tired of the Terror. When **Robespierre showed no signs of stopping the bloodshed, the rest of the Convention took matters into their own hands.** Danton had predicted: "Robespierre will follow me; I drag down Robespierre." **Robespierre was arrested and sent to the guillotine on July 28, 1794.** People then and afterward blamed him for all the horrors of the Reign of Terror, but much of the blame as well as the credit for it belonged to others.

More moderate men now governed France. The Convention wrote another constitution--the third since 1789 and the second to be put into operation-- then prepared to dissolve. A mob protested against two thirds of the new assemblies being drawn from the hated Convention. **A young artillery officer, Napoleon Bonaparte, protected the new government. He was**

then practically unknown.

The new government, the Directory, proved unable to meet the problems within disorganized France. The glory of foreign victories won under the Directory was due to *Bonaparte*. On Nov. 9, 1799, he helped overthrow the Directory and replaced it with a Consulate of three members. He was the first consul and actual ruler of France. In 1804 he discarded pretense and called himself "Napoleon I, Emperor of the French." Liberty was gone. Napoleon himself declared: "Liberty is a necessity felt only by a not very numerous class. It can therefore be restricted with impunity. Equality on the other hand pleases the multitude." Few events have so powerfully influenced the political and economic development of the modern world as the French Revolution. (*See also* France, "History"; Napoleon I.)

Mega Lecture