



DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

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Chapter 1

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

Key Points to Remember

Learning Objectives:

- To appreciate the legacy of the French Revolution.
- To explain how France became a Republic.
- To analyse the reasons for the rise of Napoleon

France Abolishes Monarchy and Becomes a Republic

- Louis XVI had signed the Constitution, but he entered into secret negotiations with the King of Prussia.
- Rulers of other neighbouring countries too were worried by the developments in France and made plans to send troops to stop the revolutionary events taking place.
- Before this could happen, the National Assembly voted in April 1792 to declare war against Prussia and Austria.
- Thousands of volunteers joined the army from the provinces to join the army.
- People saw this war as a war of the people against kings and aristocracies all over Europe.
- The patriotic song Marseillaise, composed by the poet Roget de L'Isle was sung for the first time by volunteers from Marseilles as they marched into Paris which is now the national anthem of France.
- The revolutionary wars brought losses and economic difficulties to the people.
- The Constitution of 1791 gave political rights only to the richer sections of society.
- Political clubs were established by the people who wished to discuss government policies and plan their own forms of action.

- The most successful of these clubs was that of the Jacobins.
- The members of the Jacobin club belonged mainly to the less prosperous sections of society such as small shopkeepers, artisans as well as servants and daily-wage workers. Their leader was Maximilian Robespierre.
- Jacobins started wearing long striped trousers and came to be known as the sans-culottes, literally meaning those without knee breeches.
- In the summer of 1792, the Jacobins planned a revolt of a large number of the people of Paris who were angered by the short supplies and high prices of food.
- On August 10, they stormed the Palace of the Tuileries, massacred the king's guards and held the king himself as hostage for several hours.
- Later the Assembly voted to imprison the royal family. Elections were held.
- From now on all men of 21 years and above, regardless of wealth, got the right to vote.
- The newly elected assembly was called the Convention.
- On 21st September 1792, it abolished the monarchy and declared France a republic.
- Louis XVI was sentenced to death by a court on the charge of treason.
- The queen Marie Antoinette met with the same fate shortly after.

The Reign of Terror

- The period from 1793 to 1794 is referred to as the Reign of Terror as Robespierre followed a policy of severe control and punishment.
- All his enemies, Ex-nobles, clergy, members of other political parties, even members of his own party who did not agree with his methods were arrested, imprisoned and guillotined.
- Robespierre's government issued laws placing a maximum ceiling on wages and prices.
- Meat and bread were rationed.
- Peasants were forced to transport their grain to the cities and sell it at prices fixed by the government.
- The use of more expensive white flour was forbidden, and all citizens were required to eat the equality bread, a loaf made of whole wheat.
- Instead of the traditional Monsieur (Sir) and Madame (Madam) all French men and women were addressed as Citoyen and Citoyenne (Citizen).
- Churches were shut down and their buildings converted into barracks or offices.
- Robespierre pursued his policies so harshly that even his supporters began to demand moderation.

A Directory Rules France

- A new constitution was introduced which denied the vote to non-propertied sections of society.
- It provided for two elected legislative councils which then appointed a Directory, an executive made up of five members.
- The Directors often clashed with the legislative councils, who then sought to dismiss them.
- The political instability of the Directory paved the way for the rise of a military dictator, Napoleon Bonaparte.

Women Revolution

- From the very beginning women were active participants in revolution.
- They hoped that their involvement would pressurise the revolutionary government to introduce measures to improve their lives.
- Most women of the third estate had to work for a living as laundresses, sellers, domestic servants in the houses of prosperous people.
- Most women did not have access to education or job training.
- To discuss and voice their interests' women started their own political clubs and newspapers.
- The Society of Revolutionary and Republican Women was the most famous of them.
- Women were disappointed that the Constitution of 1791 reduced them to passive citizens.
- They demanded the right to vote, to be elected to the Assembly and to hold political office.
- The revolutionary government did introduce laws that helped improve the lives of women.
- By creation of state schools, schooling was made compulsory for all girls.
- Their fathers could no longer force them into marriage against their will.
- Marriage was made into a contract entered freely and registered under civil law.
- Divorce was made legal and could be applied for by both women and men.
- Women could now train for jobs, could become artists, or run small businesses.
- During the Reign of Terror, the new government issued laws ordering closure of women's clubs and banning their political activities.
- Many prominent women were arrested and several of them executed.
- It was finally in 1946 that women in France won the right to vote.

The Abolition of Slavery

- The unwillingness of Europeans to go and work in the colonies in the Caribbean which were important suppliers of commodities such as tobacco, indigo, sugar and coffee created a shortage of labour on the plantations. Thus, the slave trade began in the seventeenth century.
- French merchants sailed from their ports to the African coast, where they bought slaves from local chieftains.
- Branded and shackled, the slaves were packed tightly into ships for the three-month long voyage across the Atlantic to the Caribbean.
- There they were sold to plantation owners. The exploitation of slave labour made it possible to meet the growing demand in European markets for sugar, coffee, and indigo.
- Port cities like Bordeaux and Nantes owed their economic prosperity to the flourishing slave trade.
- The National Assembly held long debates for about whether the rights of man should be extended to all French subjects including those in the colonies.

- But it did not pass any laws, fearing opposition from businessmen whose incomes depended on the slave trade.
- Jacobin regime in 1794, abolished slavery in the French colonies.
- However, ten years later, Napoleon reintroduced slavery.
- Slavery was finally abolished in French colonies in 1848.

The Revolution and Everyday Life

- After the storming of the Bastille in the summer of 1789 was the abolition of censorship.
- The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen proclaimed freedom of speech and expression to be a natural right.
- Newspapers, pamphlets, books and printed pictures flooded the towns of France from where they travelled rapidly into the countryside and described and discussed the events and changes taking place in France.
- Plays, songs and festive processions attracted large numbers of people which was one way they could grasp and identify with ideas such as liberty or justice.

Rise of Napoleon Bonaparte

- After the end of reign of terror, directory created political instability.
- In 1804, Napoleon Bonaparte crowned himself Emperor of France.
- He conquered many neighbouring countries and placed members of his family on the crown.
- Napoleon saw his role as a moderniser of Europe.
- He introduced many laws such as the protection of private property and a uniform system of weights and measures provided by the decimal system.
- Initially, many welcomed Napoleon as a liberator who would bring freedom for the people. But soon the Napoleonic armies came to be viewed everywhere as an invading force.
- He was finally defeated at Waterloo in 1815.

Legacy of the French Revolution

- The ideas of liberty and democratic rights were the most important legacy of the French Revolution.
- These spread from France to the rest of Europe during the nineteenth century, where feudal systems were abolished.
- Later, these ideas were adopted by Indian revolutionary strugglers, Tipu Sultan and Rammohan Roy also.