Chapter 1: The Causes of the Revolution (up to 1789)

In the period preceding the French Revolution, France was a country marked by strong social, economic and political inequalities. The structure of society was still organized according to the system of the "estates general", a rigid division into three orders: the First Estate, consisting of the clergy; the Second Estate, composed of the nobility; and the Third Estate, which included 98% of the population, made up of the bourgeoisie, artisans, peasants and urban workers. Despite their enormous numerical and economic importance, the members of the Third Estate enjoyed neither adequate representation nor fiscal privileges; on the contrary, they were the most heavily taxed, while the clergy and nobility enjoyed exemptions and incomes.

Economically, the situation was dramatic. France was seriously in debt, largely due to military spending in wars such as the Seven Years' War and, in particular, to support the American Revolution. Interest on the public debt devoured a large part of the state budget. Added to this were poor harvests that had caused famines and the increase in the prices of basic necessities, especially bread, fueling discontent and hunger among the working classes.

In parallel, a profound cultural and ideological change was taking place. The Enlightenment, with its philosophers such as Voltaire, Rousseau, Montesquieu and Diderot, spread ideas of freedom, equality, rationality and criticism of absolute power. These ideas were not confined to the intellectual elite, but spread among the bourgeoisie and even among part of the people, fueling the desire for reform and social justice.

The monarchy, however, seemed deaf to the calls for change. Louis XVI, although less authoritarian than his predecessors, was indecisive and ill-advised, incapable of tackling a tax reform that could have affected the privileged. The attempts of the finance minister Necker to introduce a minimum of fiscal equity were blocked by the nobles themselves. With the state at risk of bankruptcy, Louis XVI was forced, in 1788, to convene the Estates General for the following year, an assembly that had not met since 1614. It was this decision, apparently technical, that triggered a series of events that led to the revolutionary explosion.

Chapter 2: The Beginning of the Revolution (1789-1791)

In 1789, the crisis of the Ancien Régime officially began. The convocation of the Estates General by Louis XVI was greeted with great hopes, especially by the Third Estate, which saw in this assembly an opportunity to finally make its voice heard. However, serious disagreements soon emerged: each estate had the right to only one collective vote, which allowed the clergy and the nobility to join forces and systematically cancel the proposals of the Third Estate, despite the fact that it represented the vast majority of the population. This injustice caused a decisive split.

On June 17, 1789, representatives of the Third Estate, supported by some members of the other two orders, proclaimed themselves the “National Assembly,” claiming to represent the entire French nation. Three days later, symbolically powerful events occurred: the room where they were supposed to meet was found closed, and the deputies moved to the nearby tennis court room (jeu de paume), where they swore not to dissolve until they had given France a new constitution. This was the so-called Tennis Court Oath, a gesture of rupture that marked the beginning of the political revolution.

Meanwhile, tensions were growing in Paris and the countryside. The people feared a military crackdown and reacted violently: on 14 July 1789, a crowd of citizens stormed the Bastille, a prison that was a symbol of the king’s arbitrary power. The storming of the Bastille had a huge emotional and political impact: it demonstrated that the monarchy could be overthrown and that the people were ready to fight for their rights. Riots in the countryside multiplied (the so-called “Great Fear”), where peasants attacked castles and burned feudal archives.

In response to these revolts, on August 4, the National Assembly decreed the abolition of feudal privileges, marking the end of the social order of the Ancien Régime. A few days later, on August 26, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen was proclaimed: a fundamental document that enshrined the principles of liberty, equality, property, and popular sovereignty, inspired by the philosophers of the Enlightenment and the American Revolution.

In 1790, France entered a process of profound transformation: the provinces, justice, and tax system were reformed. The Church was also affected: with the Civil Constitution of the Clergy (1790), bishops and priests were elected and paid by the State, creating a rift between "constitutional" Catholics and those faithful to the Pope. All this culminated in 1791 with the approval of a new constitution, which transformed France into a constitutional monarchy: the king retained limited powers and was subject to the control of an elected legislative assembly.

But trust in the sovereign was already fading. In June 1791, Louis XVI attempted to flee to the Austrian border, hoping to find refuge and perhaps support to restore absolute power. However, he was arrested in Varennes and brought back to Paris. This episode destroyed the already fragile trust between the people and the king, marking the beginning of a much more radical and conflictual phase of the revolution.

Chapter 3: The Republic and the Terror (1792-1794)

In 1792 the revolution entered a decidedly more radical and dramatic phase. After the failure of the constitutional monarchy, confidence in Louis XVI had collapsed. Public opinion, especially in the cities, was now convinced that the king was plotting with foreign powers to restore his absolute power. In this climate of growing tension, France declared war on Austria in April 1792, fearing external intervention to

re-establish the monarchy. The war, however, proved difficult and initially disastrous, worsening the internal crisis.

The people of Paris, driven by hunger, anger and a growing revolutionary spirit, reacted forcefully. On 10 August 1792, the sans-culottes – the popular militants of the revolution – stormed the Tuileries Palace, home to the royal family, who were arrested and imprisoned. A few days later, on 21 September, the Assembly decided to abolish the monarchy and proclaim the Republic. It was the birth of the First French Republic.

The new regime immediately found itself having to face internal and external enemies. Internally, society was divided: the most radical revolutionaries, the Jacobins, wanted to bring about profound and rapid changes, while the more moderate Girondins feared excessive centralization and radicalization. Externally, the European monarchies watched with concern what was happening in France and prepared to intervene militarily to stop the revolutionary contagion.

In January 1793, the situation reached a point of no return: Louis XVI was tried for treason, sentenced to death and guillotined. Shortly thereafter, Queen Marie Antoinette suffered the same fate. The death of the king was a powerful signal: the revolution had not only overthrown monarchical authority, but was establishing a new order based on popular power and the sovereignty of the law.

However, the violence did not stop there. The following months were marked by suspicion, repression and a spiral of terror. The Jacobins, led by Robespierre, took control of the government through the Committee of Public Safety. They believed that to save the revolution it was necessary to eliminate all forms of opposition. Thus began the so-called Reign of Terror, during which thousands of people were arrested, summarily tried and executed by guillotine: nobles, suspected counterrevolutionaries, former revolutionaries who had become inconvenient, even ordinary citizens accused of “little civic virtue”.

In this dark and oppressive climate, Robespierre became an almost messianic figure: he proclaimed his desire to build a “Republic of virtue” based on justice and equality, but in practice he established a personal, rigid and intolerant power. Fear and intolerance towards his authority grew rapidly. In July 1794, Robespierre himself was arrested and executed along with his closest collaborators. With his death, the bloodiest phase of the revolution ended.

Chapter 4: The Directory and Instability (1795-1799)

After the fall of Robespierre in July 1794, France entered a transitional phase marked by uncertainty and attempts at stabilization. The Terror had left a country exhausted, traumatized and longing for peace. A period known as the “Thermidorian Reaction” began, named after the month Thermidor of the revolutionary calendar in which Robespierre was deposed. In this context, many of the Jacobin excesses were denounced, and the more moderate forces

They tried to restore order, both by eliminating the symbols of Terror and by repressing radical movements that still called for greater social equality.

In 1795, a new Constitution was passed that established a government called the Directory, made up of five members chosen by the legislative assembly. The Directory represented a sort of compromise: it did not restore the ancien régime but sought to curb the most extreme revolutionary impulses and to guarantee a certain stability. However, this government soon found itself in difficulty. On the one hand, it had to deal with monarchist and counter-revolutionary revolts, especially in the south of the country and in Vendée; on the other, popular and socialist movements such as the “Babuvites”, inspired by Gracchus Babeuf, who proposed a form of primitive communism and absolute equality, continued to demand profound reforms.

To further complicate matters, France was still engaged in war against various European monarchies. Paradoxically, it was on this front that the Republic achieved its greatest successes. The revolutionary army, strengthened by conscription and patriotic spirit, achieved important victories. Among the generals who distinguished themselves, the charismatic figure of Napoleon Bonaparte emerged. His lightning-fast campaign in Italy in 1796-1797 not only brought prestige and resources to France, but also introduced the public to an ambitious young leader, capable of combining military skill and political talent.

While the Directory was struggling to survive amid economic crises, inflation, and political instability, Napoleon was growing in the collective imagination as the strongman capable of restoring order and glory to the country. Many French people, tired of uncertainty and divisions, began to look to him with confidence, seeing him as a possible savior. This growing popularity called into question the balance of the Directory, which was no longer able to effectively control either internal politics or the ambitions of the young general.

Finally, in 1799, in a climate of tension and with the consent of important sectors of the army and the bourgeoisie, Napoleon carried out a coup d'état, known as the coup d'état of 18 Brumaire (November 9), which put an end to the Directory and began a new phase: the Consulate. With this event, the political revolution that had begun ten years earlier symbolically ended, giving way to a new order led by a single man.

Chapter 5: The Rise of Napoleon and the End of the Revolution (1799)

With the coup d'état of 18 Brumaire, Napoleon Bonaparte took power decisively, while maintaining, at least initially, the appearance of legality and republican continuity. Thus was born the Consulate, a new form of government in which power was concentrated in the hands of three consuls, although it was immediately clear that the true ruler was Napoleon, First Consul. In a short time, he consolidated his authority, centralizing administrative and political control and initiating a series of reforms aimed at restoring order and stability in France.

Napoleon presented himself as the peacemaker after the revolutionary chaos: he guaranteed internal security, reorganized the public administration and the school system, and launched one of his most enduring works, the Civil Code (or Napoleonic Code), which rationalized French law based on the principles of legal equality and private property. On the religious level, in 1801 he signed a concordat with the Catholic Church, normalizing relations with the papacy without renouncing state control over religion. All this earned him the support of large sectors of the population, eager for normality after years of upheaval.

But Napoleon's ambition went beyond the role of guarantor of the order. In 1802 he was appointed consul for life, and in 1804 he performed the most symbolic and definitive act: he was crowned Emperor of the French. The ceremony, celebrated in the cathedral of Notre-Dame with the blessing of the Pope, was a clear message of continuity with the imperial tradition, but also of rupture, since it was Napoleon himself who crowned himself, to underline that power did not come to him from God or from the people, but from himself.

The French Revolution, at this point, could be considered concluded. Its principles – liberty, equality, the end of privilege – had profoundly transformed French society and inspired movements throughout Europe. However, the republican experiment had ended with the return to a form of authoritarianism, however modern and efficient. Napoleon did not restore the ancien régime, but built a new imperial order that would profoundly mark the 19th century.

In short, the French Revolution, born to overthrow monarchical absolutism and affirm popular sovereignty, had developed through dramatic and contradictory phases: from reformist enthusiasm to violent radicalization, from republican hope to the concentration of power in a single individual. It was a revolution that changed the face of France and Europe forever, paving the way for political modernity, but also leaving open the unresolved dilemmas of freedom, equality and power.