

# French Revolution

The French Revolution (French: Révolution française [ʁevɔlysjɔ̃ˈfʁɑ̃sɛːz]) was a period of political and societal change in France which began with the Estates General of 1789 and ended with the Coup of 18 Brumaire on 9 November 1799. Many of the revolution's ideas are considered fundamental principles of liberal democracy,[1] and its values remain central to modern French political discourse.[2]

The causes of the revolution were a combination of social, political, and economic factors which the ancien régime ("old regime") proved unable to manage. A financial crisis and widespread social distress led to the convocation of the Estates General in May 1789, its first meeting since 1614. The representatives of the Third Estate broke away and re-constituted themselves as a National Assembly in June. The Storming of the Bastille in Paris on 14 July was followed by radical measures by the Assembly, among them the abolition of feudalism, state control over the Catholic Church, and a declaration of rights. The next three years were dominated by a struggle for political control. King Louis XVI's attempted flight to Varennes in June 1791 further discredited the monarchy, and military defeats after the outbreak of the French Revolutionary Wars in April 1792 led to an armed insurrection on 10 August 1792. The monarchy was replaced by the French First Republic in September, and while most of the royal family, including Queen Marie Antoinette, were executed, Louis XVI was exiled to Austria as part of a diplomatic agreement aimed at preventing hostilities with the Habsburgs.

After another revolt in June 1793, the constitution was suspended, and political power passed from the National Convention to the Committee of Public Safety, dominated by moderate Girondins led by Georges Danton. About 16,000 people were sentenced by the Revolutionary Tribunal and executed in the Reign of Terror, which ended in July 1794 with the Thermidorian Reaction. Weakened by external threats and internal opposition, the Committee of Public Safety was replaced in November 1795 by the Directory. Its instability ended in the coup of 18 Brumaire and the establishment of the Consulate, with Napoleon Bonaparte as First Consul.

## Causes

The Revolution resulted from multiple long-term and short-term factors, culminating in a social, economic, financial and political crisis in the late 1780s.[3][4][5] Combined with resistance to reform by the ruling elite and indecisive policy by Louis XVI and his ministers, the result was a crisis the state was unable to manage.[6][7]

Between 1715 and 1789, the French population grew from 21 to 28 million, 20% of whom lived in towns or cities, Paris alone having over 600,000 inhabitants.[8] This was accompanied by a tripling in the size of the middle class, which comprised almost 10% of the population by 1789.[9] Despite increases in overall prosperity, its benefits were largely restricted to the rentier and mercantile classes, while the living standards fell for wage labourers and peasant farmers who rented their land.[10][11] Economic recession from 1785, combined with bad harvests in 1787 and 1788, led to high unemployment and food prices, causing a financial and political crisis.[3][12][13][14]

While the state also experienced a debt crisis, the level of debt itself was not high compared with Britain's.[15] A significant problem was that tax rates varied widely from one region to another, were often different from the official amounts, and were collected inconsistently. Its complexity meant uncertainty over the amount contributed by any authorised tax caused resentment among all taxpayers.[16][a] Attempts to simplify the system were blocked by the regional Parlements which

approved financial policy. The resulting impasse led to the calling of the Estates General of 1789, which became radicalised by the struggle for control of public finances.[18]

Louis XVI was willing to consider reforms, but he often backed down when faced with opposition from conservative elements within the nobility. Enlightenment critiques of social institutions were widely discussed among the educated French elite. At the same time, the American Revolution and the European revolts of the 1780s inspired public debate on issues such as patriotism, liberty, equality, and democracy. These shaped the response of the educated public to the crisis,[19] while scandals such as the Affair of the Diamond Necklace fuelled widespread anger at the court, nobility, and church officials.[20]

## **Crisis of the Ancien Régime**

### **Financial and political crisis**

France faced a series of budgetary crises during the 18th century as revenues failed to keep pace with expenditure.[21][22] Although the economy grew solidly, the increase was not reflected in a proportional growth in taxes,[21] their collection being contracted to tax farmers who kept much of it as personal profit. As the nobility and Church benefited from many exemptions, the tax burden fell mainly on peasants.[23] Reform was difficult because new tax laws had to be registered with regional judicial bodies or parlements that were able to block them. The king could impose laws by decree, but this risked open conflict with the parlements, the nobility, and those subject to new taxes.[24]

France primarily funded the Anglo-French War of 1778–1783 through loans. Following the peace, the monarchy borrowed heavily, culminating in a debt crisis. By 1788, half of state revenue was required to service its debt.[25] In 1786, the French finance minister, Calonne, proposed a package of reforms including a universal land tax, the abolition of grain controls and internal tariffs, and new provincial assemblies appointed by the king. The new taxes were rejected, first by a hand-picked Assembly of Notables dominated by the nobility, then by the parlements when submitted by Calonne's successor Brienne. The notables and parlements argued that the proposed taxes could only be approved by an Estates-General, a representative body that had last met in 1614.[26]

The conflict between the Crown and the parlements became a national political crisis. Both sides issued a series of public statements, the government arguing that it was combating privilege and the parlement defending the ancient rights of the nation. Public opinion was firmly on the side of the parlements, and riots broke out in several towns. Brienne's attempts to raise new loans failed, and on 8 August 1788, he announced that the king would summon an Estates-General to convene the following May. Brienne resigned and was replaced by Jacques Necker.[27]

In September 1788, the Parlement of Paris ruled that the Estates-General should convene in the same form as in 1614, meaning that the three estates (the clergy, nobility, and Third Estate or "commons") would meet and vote separately, with votes counted by estate rather than by head. As a result, the clergy and nobility could combine to outvote the Third Estate despite representing less than 5% of the population.[28][29]

Following the relaxation of censorship and laws against political clubs, a group of liberal nobles and middle class activists known as the Society of Thirty launched a campaign for the doubling of Third Estate representation and individual voting. The public debate sparked an average of 25 new political pamphlets published each week from 25 September 1788.[30] The Abbé Sieyès issued influential pamphlets titled *What Is the Third Estate?* denouncing the privilege of the clergy and nobility, and arguing the Third Estate represented the nation and should sit alone as a National

Assembly. Activists such as Jean Joseph Mounier, Antoine Barnave and Maximilien Robespierre organised regional meetings, petitions and literature in support of these demands.[31] In December, the king agreed to double the representation of the Third Estate but left the question of counting votes for the Estates-General to decide.[32]