

The French Revolution

The American Revolution ended in 1782 when Britain signed the Treaty of Paris with the new United States. Only six years later, the desire for change crossed the Atlantic Ocean and erupted in France. Paris became the center of this revolutionary explosion, sending shock waves throughout Europe.

Causes of the French Revolution

1. French Social Divisions

Old Regime French society was divided into three classes or "estates". The First Estate was the clergy---consisting of priests and Church officials. The Second Estate was the nobility. The nobles held many special privileges, such as being exempt from many taxes and having the right to collect feudal dues. Nobles also served as officers in the army and held high positions at court. The Third Estate, the largest of the three estates, was made up of the common people. This estate included the bourgeoisie---the middle classes of merchants, professionals, and shopkeepers. It also included urban workers and the largest group in France---the peasantry.

2. The Impact of Enlightenment Ideas

Enlightenment ideas made many Frenchman unwilling to accept the divine right of kings and the privileged positions of the Church and nobility. Many bourgeoisies, influenced by their rising wealth and Enlightenment ideas, resented the special privileges of the nobles. Many liberal nobles and clergy actually shared their beliefs. Although there was censorship, a flourishing "underground" press poked fun at the King and his unpopular queen, Marie Antoinette.

3. Financial Crisis

The financial system of France was based on tradition. Different social classes and even different geographical regions paid different tax rates. For example, some provinces had joined France later in history and had been given special rights. Towns and provinces taxed each other's goods, hurting trade. Over time, the King had sold off rights to collect many taxes to "tax farmers" and office-holders. By the late 1700s, many saw this whole system as outdated and unfair. Although France was actually a wealthy country, the government did not have an efficient means for taxing this wealth.

To finance their wars with Britain, French ministers had relied heavily on borrowing. Because of the high costs of helping the American colonists during their war for independence, the Crown now faced a severe financial crisis. By 1786, France's finances were in a desperate situation. The finance minister informed the King he could no longer obtain any more loans. To deal with the problem, the king's ministers summoned the nobility to Paris in 1787 for a special Assembly of Nobles. The government suggested that the nobles surrender their privileges to help the Crown pay off its debts.

The nobles said that before they could take any such step, the government must hold an Estates General---a national assembly in which each of the three social classes was represented in its own chamber.

No Estates General had met since 1614. The nobles felt they would be able to control the Estates General, since the First and Second Estates would vote similarly. King Louis XVI gave into their demands. Elections were held all over France to select delegates from different estates. People became very excited as they debated issues and drew up instructions for the delegates.

Main Events of the Revolution

What began as a contest for power between the king and the nobles quickly turned into a struggle over the future of the monarchy and the existence of hereditary privileges. In the course of the revolution, power shifted first to the liberal nobles and moderate bourgeoisie, then to the radical shopkeepers and craftsmen, and finally back to the bourgeoisie.

Because of the greater number of people in the Third Estate, they elected twice as many delegates to the Estates General as the First and Second Estates. When the Estates General met in May 1789, the delegates from the Third Estate quickly declared themselves to be a National Assembly.

The King sought to break up the Assembly. When word of this attempt reached the people of Paris in July, they seized the royal prison known as the Bastille in a search for weapons. The King, fearful of popular unrest, reluctantly recognized the new National Assembly.

In August 1789, the National Assembly abolished the privileges of the nobles. They also confiscated Church lands to pay off the state's debts. The Assembly next issued a Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, proclaiming that government rested on the consent of the people (popular sovereignty), not on the divine right of the king. The Declaration also announced that all Frenchmen were "free and equal." The slogan of the Revolution became "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity." A written constitution was drafted and adopted, creating a national legislature and making France a constitutional monarchy. A constitutional monarchy is a form of government in which the monarch's power is shared with a popular assembly and is limited by law and tradition.

The Revolution Takes a Radical Turn

Meanwhile, there was a poor harvest in 1789. Hungry Parisians marched to the King's palace at Versailles in October 1789, and dragged the royal family back to Paris.

For a short time, it seemed the King might accept the changes brought by the revolution. In July 1790, Louis XVI took an oath to the Constitution. However, in June 1791, Louis and his family tried to escape. They were caught and returned to Paris. Soon after, the monarchy was overthrown and France became a republic—a government without a king, in which citizens are given the right to elect their representatives. Under a new constitution, every adult male in France could vote. A single-chamber legislature, known as the Convention, was elected. Louis XVI was put on trial for crimes against his people and executed in 1793.

The new French Republic was seen as a threat by other European rulers. Since 1792, France had been at war with other European countries. Parts of France were in open rebellion, and it seemed that France might lose the war until a Committee of Public Safety took over in 1793. The Committee began a "Reign

of Terror.” They were directed by Robespierre and other radical leaders, who were idealistic followers of Rousseau. They felt they needed to use force to achieve their goals. The Committee of Public Safety used savage repression to crush the rebels. Laws were passed allowing the government to arrest anyone. People even lost the right to defend themselves. Nobles, Catholic priests, and other suspected traitors were executed. Historians estimate as many as 40,000 suspects may have been killed.

Meanwhile, France needed to raise a large army to fight against neighboring European powers. France introduced mass conscription, requiring all males to serve in the army. France’s large armies and other forceful measures turned the tide of the war. Once the risk of losing the war ended, the Convention turned against its leaders. Afraid for their own safety, Convention members seized Robespierre and his followers, who were executed. The terror ended and power shifted back to the moderates.

Impact of the Revolution

1. The Revolution challenged the idea of the divine right of kings and the privileges of the nobility in Europe.
2. The Revolution stood for democratic government and social equality. Political power in France shifted from the king and his nobles to the bourgeoisie class.
3. The Revolution removed feudal restrictions from France, clearing the way for the creation of a modern capitalist economy.
4. Both the American and French Revolutions served as models for citizens in other countries seeking political change.

Comparison of the American and French Revolutions

- Issues of taxation helped spark each revolution. In each revolution, Enlightenment ideas contributed to the popular desire for more rights and liberties. The American Revolution was based on Locke; the French Revolution on Rousseau.
- Each revolution sought to establish democratic principles of government. The American Revolution established a limited democracy in which only property-owners could vote. During its radical phase, the French Revolution established a democracy of all adult males.
- The American Revolution guaranteed freedom of religion; the French Revolution challenged the role of the Catholic Church.
- Both revolutions established republican governments, although the French Republic did not last. It was replaced by the dictatorship of Napoleon and then by Louis XVIII.
- The American Revolution overthrew a distant colonial ruler. In the French Revolution, the people overthrew their own existing social order.
- Both revolutions led to violence. However, the French Revolution proved much more violent than the American Revolution.