

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

Liberty, Equality, Fraternity — The Upheaval That Reshaped the World

1789 – 1799



A Decade That Changed History



- 1789** ● Storming of the Bastille; Declaration of Rights
- 1791** ● Constitutional monarchy established
- 1792** ● Monarchy abolished; Republic declared
- 1793** ● Reign of Terror begins; Louis XVI executed
- 1794** ● Fall of Robespierre (Thermidor)
- 1799** ● Napoleon's coup ends the Revolution

The Old Regime: A Society Divided

France was divided into three rigid social classes, or Estates, with vast inequality in wealth, privilege, and political power.

First Estate

Clergy

~0.5%

of the population

Owned 10% of land, exempt from most taxes, collected tithes from the peasantry.

Second Estate

Nobility

~1.5%

of the population

Held top government and military positions, enjoyed feudal privileges and tax exemptions.

Third Estate

Everyone Else

~98%

of the population

Bore nearly all the tax burden — from wealthy bourgeoisie to starving peasants and urban workers.

Roots of Revolution



Crushing Taxation

The Third Estate bore nearly all taxes — the taille, gabelle, and corvée — while the privileged classes were exempt.



Bread Crisis

Crop failures in 1788 sent bread prices soaring. A laborer could spend 80% of wages on bread alone.



Enlightenment Ideas

Thinkers like Voltaire, Rousseau, and Montesquieu challenged divine right and championed individual liberty.



Royal Debt

Decades of lavish spending and costly wars (including American independence) left the treasury bankrupt.

A Kingdom in Bankruptcy

50%

of royal revenue went to
debt repayment by 1788

France's national debt had ballooned to 4 billion livres — an astronomical sum that consumed half of all tax revenue.

What Drained the Treasury

- The Palace of Versailles and court extravagance
- The Seven Years' War (1756–1763)
- Financing the American Revolution
- Inefficient tax collection riddled with corruption
- Refusal of the privileged classes to accept tax reform

Faces of the Revolution: The Crown



Louis XVI

King of France (1774–1792)

A well-meaning but indecisive ruler who inherited a kingdom drowning in debt. His attempts at reform were blocked by the nobility. The disastrous Flight to Varennes in 1791 shattered public trust. Tried for treason and executed by guillotine on January 21, 1793.

Marie Antoinette

Queen of France (1774–1793)

The Austrian-born queen became a symbol of royal excess, earning the nickname "Madame Deficit." While the famous "Let them eat cake" quote is almost certainly apocryphal, her lavish lifestyle fueled popular rage. Executed on October 16, 1793.

Faces of the Revolution: The Radicals

Maximilien Robespierre

Architect of the Terror

A lawyer who rose to dominate the Committee of Public Safety. His vision of a "Republic of Virtue" justified mass executions. Eventually consumed by his own revolution — guillotined July 28, 1794.

Georges Danton

Voice of the Revolution

A powerful orator who helped establish the Revolutionary Tribunal. Initially allied with Robespierre, he later called for moderation — and was sent to the guillotine for it in April 1794.

Jean-Paul Marat

Friend of the People

Radical journalist whose newspaper L'Ami du peuple demanded violent purges of "enemies of the revolution." Assassinated in his bathtub by Charlotte Corday in July 1793.

JULY 14, 1789

The Storming of the Bastille

A Parisian mob, fearing a royal military crackdown, stormed the Bastille fortress-prison — a hated symbol of absolute monarchy and arbitrary detention.

Though only seven prisoners were found inside, the symbolic power was immense. The fall of the Bastille marked the point of no return — the moment the revolution became irreversible.

~1,000

Revolutionaries attacked

~100

Killed in the assault

Declaration of the Rights of Man

August 26, 1789



"Men are born and remain free and equal in rights."

— Article I

Inspired by Enlightenment philosophy and the American Declaration of Independence, this document enshrined natural rights and popular sovereignty as the foundation of government.

Core Principles

- Liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression
- Sovereignty belongs to the nation, not the king
- Law is the expression of the general will
- Freedom of speech, press, and religion
- Taxation only by common consent
- Presumption of innocence

THE REIGN OF TERROR



September 1793 – July 1794

~17,000

Officially executed

by guillotine across France

~40,000

Total deaths

including prison and summary executions

300,000+

Arrested

as suspected enemies of the revolution

Under the Committee of Public Safety, led by Robespierre, the revolution consumed its own. The Law of Suspects allowed arrest on the flimsiest pretexts. The Revolutionary Tribunal offered little defense — the accused were often convicted within minutes.

"Terror is nothing more than speedy, severe, and inflexible justice." — Robespierre

Thermidor: The Terror Devours Itself



By the summer of 1794, the Convention had grown terrified of Robespierre's unchecked power. On 9 Thermidor (July 27), a coalition of deputies moved against him.

The Thermidorian Reaction

Robespierre was arrested and guillotined the next day, along with 21 of his allies. The Terror's machinery was swiftly dismantled — the Revolutionary Tribunal was reformed, political prisoners were released, and the Jacobin Club was shuttered.

What Followed

1795

The Directory established — a five-member executive committee

1796

Napoleon rises to prominence in the Italian Campaign

1799

Napoleon's coup d'état ends the Revolution and begins the Consulate

Legacy: A World Transformed

The French Revolution's impact rippled far beyond France, reshaping politics, society, and thought across the globe.

End of Feudalism

Abolished the feudal system, noble privileges, and the power of the Catholic Church in governance.

Modern Nationalism

The concept of the citizen-nation replaced the king-subject relationship, inspiring national movements across Europe.

Legal Reform

Paved the way for the Napoleonic Code, which became the basis for civil law in dozens of countries.

Human Rights

The Declaration of the Rights of Man remains a cornerstone document of democratic governance worldwide.

Political Radicalism

The terms "left" and "right" in politics originate from seating in the French National Assembly.

Revolutionary Precedent

Inspired the Haitian Revolution, Latin American independence movements, and revolutions of 1848.

LIBERTÉ ÉGALITÉ FRATERNITÉ

*The revolution that began with the fall of a prison
ended with the rise of an empire — but its ideals endure.*

Thank You

