

The French Revolution
AP World History
Kienast

In the late 18th century most people in France lived in poverty, were taxed heavily, and had no rights. France was controlled by a rigid social hierarchal system called the Estate System. The first and second estates contained Church clergy and nobility while all commoners were grouped into the Third Estate. Commoners made up roughly 98% of the population. The Third Estate citizens also naturally divided themselves socially since it was such a large percentage of the population. The wealthy and educated intelligentsia class were known as the *bourgeoisie*, and were followed socially by skilled workers such as blacksmiths, carpenters and other craftsmen. The bulk of the French population, roughly 80% of the population, belonged to the Third Estate's peasant class. Peasants were poor, uneducated, and often on the edge of starvation.

One problem with Estate System was that the Third Estate paid over half their wages in taxes and tithes while the upper classes paid few, if any, taxes, creating anger and resentment from the common class. Another problem was that the intelligentsia, the *bourgeoisie*, felt that since they paid taxes they should be allowed to contribute to the decision-making process but were given no say in government.

Another problem was that the king in 1789, Louis XVI, was totally incompetent. He and his wife Marie Antoinette were totally out of touch with the problems facing the French public. Louis became leader of France in 1774 at the age of 20 after the death of his grandfather, Louis XV. Despite having a classical education in Latin, history and literature, he was not prepared to rule in a practical way. His father, and two older brothers died before taking the throne, and Louis spent his life thinking he would never inherit the throne. Louis' cause as king was not helped by the fact that he was married to an unpopular queen, Marie Antoinette, a daughter of the Austrian leader Maria Theresa. Although popular at first, she became aggressively social, attending the opera and dances in the capital, gambling and partying late into the night at Versailles. In public and at court she was seen only in the latest and most expensive fashions, all while her people suffered.

One other factor that led to the French Revolution was the economy of France in the late 18th century. The government owed huge debts due to its involvement in wars with other European monarchies, including the American Revolution. Eventually the French government owed so much money that French banks refused to loan the government money, leading to massive inflation and an economic depression.

Late-18th century crop failures led to a shortage of bread. The two years prior to the revolution, 1788–1789, saw meager harvests and harsh winters, possibly because volcanic eruptions in Iceland had decreased temperatures throughout Northern Europe. Despite lessons learned from cooler temperatures during the Little Ice Age, French farmers had refused to plant cold-hardy crops such as potatoes, instead relying on warmer-weather crops such as wheat.

In 1789 the American Revolution's successful end inspired discussions concerning a similar rebellion against the French monarchy. There were several similarities between the revolutions in France and the American colonies. Both revolutions were based on taxation problems. The American Revolutionaries were upset that American colonists paid taxes but did not have any say in British Parliament. The French Revolutionaries were upset that the Third Estate paid all the taxes but had no effective representation in the Estates-General. Both revolutions were based on Enlightenment ideas of social contract. Both the American and French Revolutions began under the rule of leaders who were out of touch with their people. George III of England had no sense as to why the American colonists were upset and Louis XVI was an inexperienced and incompetent king. The differences in the revolts lie in the lack of trade issues in the French Revolution and lack of social class tensions in the American Revolution. The trade difference is natural because the French Revolution was internal...French commoners were fighting French nobility and certainly all were allowed to trade with other countries freely. The lack of social class tensions can be attributed to the fact that there were no social classes in the American colonies, everyone was a colonist and they were all treated poorly.

In early 1789 Louis decided to call a session of parliament to deal with problems but the Estates-General was no help with problems. The Estates-General was divided into three houses, with each estate controlling one house. When votes were taken, the first two noble estates always outvoted the third estate by a 2-1 vote. To combat this unfairness, the Third Estate formed their own assembly, the National Assembly, in June, 1789. They met in an indoor tennis court after Louis banned them from the legislature. Eventually the National Assembly voted to continue meeting until France's problems were solved. This oath, sometimes seen as the first act of rebellion, is today known as the "Tennis Court Oath." Louis cooperated with the National Assembly at first, but later threatened to arrest representatives when they vowed to create a constitutional monarchy. French citizens began to prepare for war in 1789.

On July 14, 1789 a mob of Parisians attacked a royal fortress called the Bastille in order to gain weapons and to free political prisoners that they believed were being held at the Bastille. This first act of aggression is seen as the beginning of the French Revolution. After the fall of the Bastille, the revolution spread to the countryside. Nobles throughout France were attacked by people of lower classes in a wave of violence now called the "Great Fear." Though they eventually began to return to France in later months, most nobles fled France during this period. The royal family was placed under house arrest in their Paris residence. Eventually the fighting calmed down and the National Assembly decided to write a new constitution. In 1789 the French National Assembly passed the Declaration of the Rights of Man, which was essentially a declaration of rights, but not a proper constitution. From 1789 to 1791 the people of France debated over what type of government they should have. Some favored a full republic like that of the United States while others favored a constitutional monarchy, like England. Fearing a republic that would at least strip him of his power and, at worst, his life, Louis XVI and his family tried to flee to Austria in June 1791. This action enraged many French citizens and led to the passage of the Constitution of 1791, which abolished the *Ancien Regime*, the system of nobility governance that was used in France for centuries. The new constitution divided France into administrative divisions called "departments" rather than allowing noble families to control France. The new constitution also created a constitutional monarchy in France. This action was not enough for many citizens and violence broke out again in France. In September of 1792 the

National Assembly bowed to pressure and passed another constitution, which made France a full republic. The only question at that point was what to do with the king. The National Assembly (now renamed the National Convention) divided into four main parties in the debate over the role of the king.

The Jacobin [jack oh bin] was originally a moderate political party but became a radical party that supported the elimination of the king and the establishment of a full republic in France. They became more radical in order to gain support from the radical peasants called the *sans culottes*, who had become a major force in the Revolution. The *sans culottes* were large in number and could be called upon by whichever party that controlled them. They were called the *sans culottes*, because they did not wear the culottes or knee-length pants that were favored by the bourgeois and upper classes. The Jacobins were strong due to their support from the Mob, but also had a hard time controlling them. The Jacobins almost certainly supported violence against the king in order to win favor with the *sans culottes*, but that violence sometimes turned against all elites, and the Jacobins worried that when other elites were killed that the Mob would turn against them. They were probably right to be concerned about such a situation as almost certainly the ultimate goal of the Jacobins was to replace the elites in French society with themselves.

The Girondists [jeer ohn deest] were moderates who campaigned for the end of the monarchy but also resisted calls for the forced removal of the king. They certainly did not support the execution of the king. Most Girondists supported a republican government, but a few supported a constitutional monarchy, leading to fragmentation of the political party. They had support from a large but quiet number of French citizens who did not want radical government change. These support groups were often drowned out by the loud calls from more radical groups such as the *sans culottes* and Jacobins. The Girondists favored gradual change as a way to keep France stable and to keep monarchs in surrounding countries from getting upset with the changes that were occurring in France.

The Feuillant [full ee ahnt] was a moderate political party in France that favored the king retaining some political power as part of a constitutional monarchy. The Feuillants were disorganized due to the fact that most could not agree on how much power the king should have. They had a good deal of support in France among conservatives who did not want France to change too fast. Some of their support certainly came from former nobles, but their support was not always stable. Former nobles worried about taking too active a role in politics for fear of angering the people of France. As a result, Feuillants had financial support, but not a lot of political support.

The Emigres were the party of the far right in France. They supported the return of the monarchy in France, believing that it was unconstitutional to remove the king. While they had little support in France, other monarchies in Europe supported the efforts of the Emigres, which did impact opinions among the French citizens. Many citizens were worried that other monarchies in Europe might attack France in order to prevent a full republic from succeeding in France. While the Emigres lacked domestic political support in France, they did not lack for finances as a good amount of the wealth in France was still concentrated in the hands of the

former nobility. While not a likely scenario, some Emigres supported an eventual return of all rights and privileges to the noble classes.

The radical Jacobin came to dominate the Legislative Assembly, led by three revolutionary leaders named Jean Paul Marat, Georges Danton, and Maximilien Robespierre.

The Jacobins made several changes to France after they took control of the legislature. They renamed the assembly the National Convention and they argued for the execution of Louis XVI. They argued that Louis had to die in order for democracy to prosper in France. After a brief trial, Louis was executed January 21, 1793 and his wife, Marie Antoinette, was beheaded in October, 1793.

Unfortunately, the Jacobin did not stop executing “enemies of the revolution” with Louis and Marie Antoinette. They ordered the execution of anyone that was even suspected of working against the revolution, eventually sending thousands to their deaths. The executions ended when the National Convention ordered the death of Robespierre himself in July 1794.

Civil War between rival French factions began in 1794 and mass chaos followed Robespierre’s death. The chaos was only ended when a popular general, Napoleon Bonaparte seized control of government in 1799.