

The French Revolution, Part Two: A Timeline of the Revolution

By Encyclopædia Britannica, adapted by Newsela staff on 04.12.17

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"Liberty Leading the People" in a painting by Eugene Delacroix. Photo by: Wikimedia Commons/Musee du Louvre

The second in a two-part series

On August 4, 1789, France's new governing body, the National Assembly, held a meeting to discuss the progress of the French Revolution. At the end of the meeting, a decree was passed. It declared an end to the entire feudal system.

The feudal system had given nobles great power over the lives of peasants. In this system, peasants got pieces of land in return for serving or working for a noble person. The end of the feudal system led to the start of equal rights in France.

The Rights of Man

Meanwhile, work continued on the constitution the assembly had promised to prepare for France. The constitution was meant to lay out the new laws of the land and France's new form of government. It was finally finished in 1791.

The new constitution brought many changes. Nobility was abolished. Now there would no longer be any dukes, counts or barons born with a higher rank than other men.

The constitution also made France a limited monarchy. It would still have a king, but the king would have much less power than before.

The most famous part of the French constitution was the Declaration of the Rights of Man. "All men were born free with equal rights," it declared. "All citizens have the right to take part in electing representatives to make the laws."

The Declaration of the Rights of Man was the first step toward modern democracy.

The king wavers

At first, King Louis XVI promised to obey the constitution, even though it greatly limited his power. Later, however, he changed his mind.

The people of France mistrusted the king and his wife, Queen Marie-Antoinette. They suspected they were really enemies of the revolution.

Many nobles had fled to Germany, Austria and Switzerland before the revolution broke out. They begged the princes of Europe to topple the revolution in France. Many in France thought Louis was secretly on their side.

Overthrow of the monarchy

In June 1791, the king and queen tried to flee the country, but they were quickly captured and brought back to Paris. For many people, their flight proved they could not be trusted.

On August 10, 1792, an angry crowd invaded the king's palace. They killed the guards, forcing the royal family to flee for their lives.

On September 21, 1792, a decree was passed that "royalty is abolished in France." Four months later, Louis XVI was executed.

France was now a republic, a new form of government without a king.

The Committee of Public Safety

The new republic had many enemies, both within France and outside the country. Soon, Austria, Prussia and England had declared war on revolutionary France.

To save the revolution, a strong government was needed. Many in France were willing to sacrifice liberty for it. Between 1792 and 1795, the constitution was set aside and the Committee of Public Safety ruled France.

Georges Danton, Jean-Paul Marat and Maximilien Robespierre led the committee. Within a year, the first two men had been killed and Robespierre had taken complete control.

The committee's rule was known as the Reign of Terror. Thousands were executed, including Marie-Antoinette.

The committee did what it set out to do. The enemies of the revolution within France were silenced or killed, and by September 1792, the foreign invaders had been turned back.

The downfall of Robespierre

With the revolution seemingly saved, the people grew tired of the terror. However, Robespierre showed no signs of stopping the bloodshed. Eventually, the rest of the government had had enough. Robespierre was arrested and executed on July 28, 1794.

Napoleon Bonaparte

After Robespierre's death, a new government was formed, known as the Directory. The Directory proved unable to govern France effectively. On November 9, 1799, it was overthrown by the brilliant soldier Napoleon Bonaparte.

At first, Napoleon pretended to share power, but in 1804, he declared himself "Napoleon I, Emperor of the French." By then the early dreams of the revolution had been shattered and liberty was gone.

Quiz

- 1 Read the selection from the section "The Rights of Man."

The most famous part of the French constitution was the Declaration of the Rights of Man. "All men were born free with equal rights," it declared. "All citizens have the right to take part in electing representatives to make the laws."

Which of the following is the MOST accurate explanation of this paragraph?

- (A) The new French constitution said that all men are equal and free and that all citizens could participate in the government.
- (B) The new French constitution led to the end of slavery because it said all men were born free and equal.
- (C) The new French constitution allowed all citizens to start writing laws for other people to follow.
- (D) The new French constitution was an inspiration for the American constitution because it said that all men are created equal.

- 2 Read the selection from the section "The Committee of Public Safety."

The committee's rule was known as the Reign of Terror. Thousands were executed, including Marie-Antoinette.

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Which sentence from this selection BEST supports the implication that the Committee of Public Safety sacrificed liberty and equality?

- (A) The committee's rule was known as the Reign of Terror.
- (B) Thousands were executed, including Marie-Antoinette.
- (C) The committee did what it set out to do.
- (D) The enemies of the revolution within France were silenced or killed, and by September 1792, the foreign invaders had been turned back.

3 Read the introduction [paragraphs 1-2] and the final section, "Napoleon Bonaparte."

Which of the following explains the connection between these two sections?

- (A) The introduction explains the main goals of the revolution, while the final section describes a major failure of the revolution.
- (B) The introduction explains how the revolution was started, while the final section describes its major accomplishments.
- (C) The introduction gives historical background information on the revolution, while the final section explains why it is important today.
- (D) The introduction explains how French society was before the revolution, while the final section describes a major leader of the revolution.

4 This article is organized using chronological order.

Why do you think the author organized the information this way?

- (A) to highlight the relationship between the downfall of Robespierre and the rise of Napoleon
- (B) to present the events of the revolution clearly so the reader could understand what happened and when
- (C) to explain the historical background information that helps the reader understand why the people of France wanted a new type of government
- (D) to describe what life was like during the time of the revolution so the reader can imagine the events as they happened

Answer Key

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