

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

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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*

A report of the peasant outbreaks, from the storming of the Bastille to several other revolts, made a strong impression on the National Assembly. Some liberal nobles in that body set the example of giving up their feudal rights. Amid the wildest enthusiasm, men weeping and embracing each other, one noble after another gave up some exclusive privilege. Finally, a decree was passed that aimed at abolishing the entire feudal system. That wild night of August 4, 1789, marked the beginning of equality, though the remnants of feudal dues kept the peasants uneasy until 1793.

## **The Rights of Man**

Meanwhile work continued on the constitution, which the assembly had promised to prepare for France. It was finally finished in 1791. Nobility was abolished. France was made a limited monarchy, with a one-house legislature. The immortal part of the document was the Declaration of the Rights of Man. It included the following points:

All men were born free with equal rights. All citizens have the right to take part in electing representatives to make the laws. Every person shall be free to speak, write or print his opinions provided he does not abuse this privilege. The amount of taxes which a person is called upon to pay shall be based on the amount of wealth that he possesses.

The Declaration of the Rights of Man came to be regarded as the charter of democracy. The equality of all men in the eyes of the law is its essence. Property was inviolable, for the chief supporters of the new order owned property or desired to own it.

### **The king wavers**

A weak and indecisive king, at first Louis XVI did promise to obey the constitution, which had been instituted in 1791, even though it placed a narrow limit on his power. Later, however, he listened to counselors who changed his mind.

Many nobles had fled before the revolution broke to Germany, Austria and Switzerland. They were appealing to the princes of Europe to stop the revolution in France and threatening a reign of bloodshed when they returned. The people of France mistrusted the king and still more mistrusted Marie-Antoinette, “the Austrian woman.” In October 1789, a mob had brought them — and the assembly with them — from Versailles to Paris so that they might be more closely watched.

### **Overthrow of the monarchy**

In June 1791, the suspicions against Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette became certainties for most of the people when the king and queen, with their children, tried to escape. They were captured at Varennes before they reached the French border. They were brought back to Paris, at the beginning of the end for the monarchy.

These events helped divide the revolutionists into two parties: the Constitutional Royalists and the Republicans. The new Legislative Assembly, which met as soon as the king had accepted the constitution (September 1791), still wanted to keep the monarchy. The Republican sentiment, however, increased rapidly as the king’s weakness became more apparent.

On August 10, 1792, a mob invaded the Tuileries and killed the guards. The royal family sought refuge in the hall of the Legislative Assembly. On September 21, 1792, a decree was passed that “royalty is abolished in France,” and a republic was proclaimed. Four months later, Louis XVI was sent to the guillotine.

### **The clergy opposes the revolution**

The overthrow of the monarchy was not entirely due to the weakness of the king. Affairs generally in France seemed to be going from bad to worse. The clergy and many devout Roman Catholics had withdrawn their support from the revolution because of the laws against the church.

Others, especially merchants and tradesmen, were irritated by the paper money, or assignats, with which the country was flooded and which soon became worthless. Royalist uprisings were occurring in some provinces, as in the Vendée. At the same time that these dangers were threatening the revolution within the country, Austria and Prussia, having finished the partition of Poland, were allied against the new order in France, which threatened the old order everywhere in Europe. England was drawn into the war when the French revolutionary armies occupied the Austrian Netherlands (Belgium).

To guide the revolution through this crisis, a strong government was needed and the people were willing to sacrifice liberty for it. A convention was called to draw up a new constitution, and for three years (1792–1795) a committee of this assembly, the Committee of Public Safety, ruled France while the constitution was set aside. The power of this committee did not come from the convention, but from the radical Jacobin Club.

The men in power were Georges Danton, Jean-Paul Marat and Maximilien Robespierre until Marat was assassinated by Charlotte Corday. Through agents and spies and “deputies on mission” the committee spread its net over the whole country. It maintained its position by terror, thus coining its era ruling France as the Reign of Terror. Royalist uprisings were sternly put down, and thousands were sent to the guillotine. Marie-Antoinette, Madame Roland, aristocrats and tradesmen, atheists such as Jacques René Hébert, and even Danton (because he urged moderation) were executed, usually with a mock trial or none at all.

Old institutions were also changed. The calendar was made over, 1792 becoming the Year I, the first year of the French Republic and even the names of the months were changed.

The terror accomplished what it set out to do. The Prussian-Austrian invaders had been turned back at Valmy on September 20, 1792. Then the French armies carried the war across the borders. “All governments are our enemies,” cried an orator of the convention, “all peoples are our friends.” Belgium, Nice and Savoy were added to France. Under Lazare Carnot, called the “organizer of victory,” 14 armies were put in the field. The cry went up for the natural frontiers of France, and the revolutionary regime was going back to the policies of Louis XIV.

## **The downfall of Robespierre**

Finally, the enemies of the revolution at home and abroad seemed to be suppressed. Only Great Britain and Austria continued the war and the people were tired of the terror. When Robespierre showed no signs of stopping the bloodshed, the rest of the convention took matters into their own hands. Robespierre was arrested and sent to the guillotine on July 28, 1794. People then and afterward blamed him for all the horrors of the Reign of Terror, but much of the blame, as well as the credit for it, belonged to others.

More moderate men now governed France. The convention wrote another constitution — the third since 1789 and the second to be put into operation — then prepared to dissolve. A mob protested against two-thirds of the new assemblies being drawn from the hated convention. A young and practically unknown artillery officer named Napoleon Bonaparte protected the new government.

The new government, the Directory, proved unable to meet the problems within disorganized France. The glory of foreign victories won under the Directory was due to Bonaparte. On November 9, 1799, he helped overthrow the Directory and replaced it with a consulate of three members. He was the first consul and actual ruler of France. In 1804, he discarded pretense and called himself “Napoleon I, Emperor of the French.” Liberty was gone. Napoleon himself declared, “Liberty is a necessity felt only by a not very numerous class. It can, therefore, be restricted with impunity. Equality, on the other hand, pleases the multitude.”

## Quiz

- 1 The following evidence was gathered to prove the idea that the French Revolution was a short-term failure, but a long-term success.

1. *It included the following points: All men were born free with equal rights.*
2. *The Declaration of the Rights of Man came to be regarded as the charter of democracy. The equality of all men in the eyes of the law is its essence.*
3. *Through agents and spies and “deputies on mission” the committee spread its net over the whole country. It maintained its position by terror, thus coining its era ruling France as the Reign of Terror.*

What additional piece of evidence is needed to create a COMPLETE argument that the French Revolution was a short-term failure, but a long-term success?

- (A) Finally, a decree was passed that aimed at abolishing the entire feudal system.
  - (B) On September 21, 1792, a decree was passed that “royalty is abolished in France,” and a republic was proclaimed.
  - (C) Old institutions were also changed. The calendar was made over, 1792 becoming Year I, the first year of the French Republic, and even the names of the months were changed.
  - (D) In 1804, he discarded pretense and called himself “Napoleon I, Emperor of the French.” Liberty was gone.
- 2 Which of the following ideas did the author develop the LEAST in this article?
- (A) The influence of the Declaration of the Rights of Man on the general understanding of government and citizens.
  - (B) The reasons why the revolutionaries split into Constitutional Royalists and the Republicans.
  - (C) The actions taken by the Committee of Public Safety during the Reign of Terror.
  - (D) Napoleon Bonaparte's opinions on the main ideals behind the French Revolution and the French Republic.

3 This article is organized in chronological order.

What aspects of the French Revolution are NOT fully addressed due to this organizational structure?

- (A) how the constitutions of other nations reflect the ideas of the revolution
- (B) why the Committee of Public Safety was established
- (C) how Napoleon Bonaparte came into power
- (D) why Louis XVI was executed

4 Which of the following provides the best analysis of the article's conclusion?

- (A) The conclusion effectively explains the societal and personal factors that enabled Napoleon Bonaparte to take control over France.
- (B) The conclusion is ineffective at explaining how the ideas addressed by the National Assembly were executed in practice by France's new government.
- (C) The conclusion states that Napoleon did not believe in the ideas of the revolution, but the historical significance of the the revolution and Napoleon's rule should have been analyzed in greater detail.
- (D) The conclusion effectively describes the final events of the revolution, but the effectiveness of Napoleon's rule and the importance of his military conquests should have been described in greater detail.

## Answer Key

- 1 The following evidence was gathered to prove the idea that the French Revolution was a short-term failure, but a long-term success.

1. *It included the following points: All men were born free with equal rights.*
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What aspects of the French Revolution are NOT fully addressed due to this organizational structure?

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- (B) why the Committee of Public Safety was established
- (C) how Napoleon Bonaparte came into power
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