The French Revolution
and Radical Change

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Introduction

As Charles Dickens was to write, “for some it was the best of times, yet for others it was the worst of times”. For some it was a time of lavish living and extravagance, while for others it was a time of tragic despair and destitute poverty. In 1789, France was on the verge of bankruptcy in the aftermath of numerous unsuccessful wars that had depleted the national treasury under Louis XV. The support of the Americans and their revolution by Louis XVI had further aggravated the nation’s financial situation. The financial system that had been so successful just two generations before under Louis XIII and the Richelieu administration had disintegrate, as the aristocracy had gained greater tax exemption. The poorest segments of the population were therefore forced to carry a greater percentage of the tax burden. The Roman Catholic Church further aggravated their plight by charging a further tax on crops. When harvests failed to meet needs, the result was increasing malnutrition in the general population. Random famine began to become an increasing reality in France.

As unemployment increased throughout France, money ran short. Bread was a staple of the French diet, and when bread prices skyrocketed, widespread malnutrition extended across the country. When King Louis XVI failed to adequately address the situation, the stage was set for revolt. Other factors were also at work within the country and they would play an important part as a crisis approached.

Politics and government had changed little in the country during the Eighteenth century, and those in power, particularly the king, saw little need for change. They
seemed to be oblivious to the plight of average Frenchmen. The royal court spared no expense in its extravagance, while the common citizen was being crushed under enormous taxes from both the government and the Church. France was on the edge of a precipice and those in power did not see it, or did not care to look.

Not surprisingly, events in North America, events that France herself had no small part in shaping, were going to become an example for change in France. The American Revolution was a product of the French Enlightenment. Much of that which the Americans had taken to create their democracy could be traced to the philosophical thinking that had developed in France in the 17th and 18th centuries. By 1789, France seemed to have reached a breaking point, where change was inevitable. However, the past history of France would play a great part in driving her movement toward democracy in a strangely different direction than that of America, with much different results.

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The Old Regime

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Had France actually reached a point of inevitable change by 1789? Was there anything that the King of France could have done to avoid the catastrophes that awaited France in the decade to come? Or was it as many historians have pointed out, an overwhelming inertia for revolution in the face of absolutism that drove events? By 1848, many of the monarchies of Europe would also face revolutions.

The kings of France were the epitome of absolutism. They had ruled with near impunity provided they maintained fair relation with the aristocracy. In France, even this was not always necessary for the monarchy. When King Louis XIV came to the throne the absolute rule of the king had moved to the point where he was alleged to have declared “I am the state”, meaning he was all and all was his. By the time Louis XVI took the throne his attitude toward the country was one of possession and ownership.

The “old regime” was one of privilege and extravagance. Royalty and thus the king, ruled under the divine right granted by God, and was confirmed by the Church. In turn, the Church was granted special dispensations by the crown in lands and rights to income. For its support, the nobility was granted greater tax exemptions and privileges. Because of this, the greater burden of the country’s debt was passed to those least able to assume them – the commoners.

When the country’s financial situation became dire in 1787, the king looked to take the most natural of actions and moved to raise taxes. His first attempt was to try and forgo the traditional method and bypass the provincial parliaments by calling an Assembly of the Notables. This consisted of bureaucrats, nobles, clergy, and elements of
the bourgeoisie (middleclass). When the king proposed a new land tax that would strike the nobles and the clergy, they refused. Louis XVI was then forced to convene the Estates-General.

The Estates General

The Estates-General consisted of the three traditional bodies of the citizenry of France. The First Estate consisted of the clergy and was divided into “upper clergy” (clerical nobles), and the “lower clergy” (priests and monks). Together, they numbered around 100,000 across the country. They collected the tithe on crops, acted as moral police, censored books, and operated schools and hospitals. The Church at the time owned between 10 and 15 percent of the land in France, all held virtually tax-free. The overall wealth of the First Estate was centered mostly in the hands of the upper clergy who lived as affluent aristocrats in a land increasingly stricken with poverty. Much of the resentment toward the Church grew from this fact as even the growing numbers of Huguenot Protestants were forced to pay the tithe on their crops as well.

The Second Estate was composed of the aristocracy, which made up roughly 1 percent of the population. This French nobility class also had a hierarchy, consisting of the “magisterial order” and the “d’epee order”. The magisterial nobles were in charge of royal justice and civil government, while the latter was the nobility of the sword. Members of the Second Estate held the right to bare arms in public and distinguished themselves by wearing their Coat of Arms. They too collected taxes for themselves in the form of “feudal dues”.

Everyone else, that being those that could not claim to belong in the first two estates made up the Third Estate. This included working people, businessmen, the bourgeoisie, and right down to the peasants. The Third Estate represented 97 percent of the population in France. Because of the country’s limited franchise (vote), representation of the Third Estate was constrained to the wealthy bourgeoisie. As the tax structure stood in 1789, the overwhelming amount of taxation fell upon the Third Estate that had no financial resources other than their own endeavors and hard work.

This was the state of France in 1789. This was the Estates General in 1789. This was the reality of France in that year. This was the certainty of the France that the monarchy had created. Thus the monarch stood on top of the nobles and clergy, and they all rode on the backs of the commoners. This was the “Old Regime”. Its days were numbered, yet those in the highest places could not see the coming storm.

Fall of the Old Regime

The Estates-General was first organized by King Philip IV in 1302. As the kings of France began to exercise their growing absolutism, general assemblies were called upon less and less. The Estates-General had not convened since 1614 when Louis XVI summoned its members in 1789. When the estates began to prepare to meet, delegates across France prepared lists of complaints to present at the coming assembly and this
action raised the hopes and expectations in the country that reforms would take place. When apprehensions began to arise in the government, it moved to put together an assembly in its favor. The Parliament of Paris decreed that the Estates-General would be arranged in accordance with the “forms of 1614”. This meant that each of the three estates would have an equal amount of representatives and would vote by order, giving each estate a single vote collectively on all issues. Immediately, liberal Parisians began to call for individual voting and also for doubling the size of the Third Estate. This had already taken place during previous meetings of the provincial parliaments as being more representative of the overall population. The finance minister Jacques Necker agreed with the first proposal, but indicated that the matter of voting would have to be determined by the Estates-General itself.

As the time for assembly neared, pamphlets began to circulate throughout France proclaiming the importance of the Third Estate as the true representation of the country. One proclaimed, “What is the Third Estate? EVERYTHING! What has it been until now? NOTHING! What does it want to be? SOMETHING!” Expectations were high and the sentiments of the nation clearly called for change, but were they to come?

On May 5, 1789 the Estates-General convened at Versailles. Necker opened the proceedings with a lengthy speech expounding upon the importance of the Estates-General and its duty to resolve the issues that stood before it. However, little guidance was given as to what immediate actions the assembly was to take and the issue of voting was set aside from the start. The delegates of the three estates were directed to meet in separate chambers and validate the credentials of their members. The Third Estate then proposed that documentation of credentials should take place collectively. When the general assembly could not come to a consensus on even this matter, the great majority of the nobility coupled with a smaller majority of the clergy voted to support voting by order. The assembly had thus reached an impasse during its beginning session.

The Third Estate then moved to meet independently of the general assembly while inviting the other estates to join them. Meeting as the “Commons”, the Third Estate was joined by some of the nobility and clergy. They recognized that the “winds of change” were upon the nation. The Commons then voted to “verify their own powers” separate from the Estates-General. By June, they had declared themselves as the National Assembly of the people. In turn, the new assembly now had formed direct ties with the nation’s capitalists and the common people. This move also associated the interests of the National Assembly with those of the businessmen and with the concerns of the average people. The National Assembly now had credibility with the majority of the French population.

One of its first moves was to set up a committee to deal with the food shortages that plagued France. Next, the National Assembly declared a merge of all public debt, while declaring all existing taxes to have been illegally imposed. It then voted to retain taxation in its present form provided the Assembly remained in conference. Further, they announced that the Assembly was acting in the interests of the people and the king. In essence, King Louis XVI still held power and had to consent to any new action the National Assembly took, but clearly the Assembly felt it could now take autonomous action.

Louis XVI then moved to regain control of the nation’s affairs and at the advise of Necker, he ordered a “Royal Session” to be held to reconcile the growing dissention. The
The Constituent Assembly and Storming of the Bastille

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The National Assembly was soon called to order on July 9, 1789 and promptly renamed itself the National Constituent Assembly. In the meantime, the king had moved troops into Paris and around Versailles as a show of force. The threat of force did not deter the new Assembly and when it addressed the king, it cordially requested the removal of the troops. Louis XVI refused, but offered to move the proceeding to another city. This would have removed the support of the people of Paris and would have allowed the king to effectively surround the Assembly with troops. The Assembly declined the king’s offer.

Letters of support for the Constituent Assembly poured in from Paris and around the country, strengthening the Assembly’s resolve. The political debate that had begun with the Estates-General had been followed closely in the capital and transcripts of the proceedings were published daily in the papers. It was apparent that “Paris was intoxicated with the idea of liberty”. For his support of the National Assembly, Necker was removed from office and the finance ministry was restructured to eliminate his supporters. This was seen as the start of a royal coup and as word spread throughout Paris, riots broke out. The Paris mob soon had the unqualified support of the French
Guard in the city, and the king and his royal court and its ministers fled to the countryside in fear.

As more troops arrived, including Swiss and German mercenaries, Paris grew more volatile as its citizens began to arm themselves and the city teetered on the edge of anarchy. By early July there were over 20,000 troops in and around Paris. Crowds met daily in the open gardens of the Palais Royal to discuss the political climate. As word of Necker’s dismissal spread around Paris, angry crowds started to gather throughout the city. At the Palais Royal over 10,000 armed insurgents boiled in anger at what they saw as the first step toward a “royal coup”. By July 13, the crowds began to move through the streets in large numbers. At the open square and gardens of the Place Vendome, the mob was met by a detachment of the Royal Cavalerie Cavalry. With stones in hand, they showered the cavalry with rocks and forced them to retreat. Further along, at the large square known as the Place de Louis XV, the throng was met again by a military contingent. Shots were fired and a citizen and a soldier were killed.

The “French Guard” was known to have sympathy toward the new cause, and the regiment was confined to its barracks. A company of dragoons (foot soldiers) was stationed outside their quarters. As the disturbances spread, the French Guard attacked and killed several of the dragoons, wounded others, and put the rest to flight. They soon joined the crowd and became a military spearhead for a rebellion. With many of the higher officers in the army having earlier fled the city, the soldiers were left to their own political emotions and were caught up with the mob. With the departure of the Baron de Besenval, who was in charge of the mercenary forces, the largest contingents of royal forces were now without clear leadership from the top.

When the crowd raided the “Hotel des Invalids” (soldiers hospital), they came into possession of thousands of weapons, but little ammunition. The mob then turned its sights on the armory at the fortress of the Bastille. On July 14th, crowds began to gather along the outer walls of the fortress and demand entry. The Bastille was seen as a symbol of royal tyranny, as it has been used over the proceeding century as a prison for the king’s political enemies. By that afternoon the fortress walls were breached and the commanding officer was executed. While little ammunition and weapons were gained by its take over, the fact that the Bastille was now in the hands of the citizens became an early turning point toward the coming revolution.

During the confusion, the king took the opportunity to attempt reconciliation with the people. By the end of July he had returned to Paris to a favorable reception by its citizens. He reinstated Necker to his post, and granted a general amnesty at the urging of Necker. The French people believed that Necker was now in league with the king and saw this as a threat to their new idea of popular sovereignty. Necker quickly began to lose favor among the citizenry. Furthermore, this led to a growing distrust among the commoners toward the nobles. An uprising was just around the corner.

The Great Fear

The month of July, 1789 had seen a political turnover in Paris and in France in general. In the countryside, political events were less as important to the people as was hunger. Grain supplies had dipped to critically low levels, and local militias had been
formed to protect the grain stores and the new crop from bands of marauders. Rumors then began to spread that these bands of highwaymen were being hired by the nobles to take control of what food-stuffs were still available. This would lead to growing attacks on the aristocrats.

From mid-July and on into August, local peasants across France began to attack noble manors and property. Chateaus and estates were ransacked as the peasants moved to destroy records and deeds of obligation to the nobles. In most cases, the uprising was not aimed at individuals, but rather at eliminating the records pointing toward financial obligations that the nobles held over the peasants. Much of the resentment predated “the Great Fear” and was predicated on decades of crushing taxes and required tithes.

When harvests fell short of projections in 1789, it was another in a series of shortfalls that had left many to be turned out of the land. Failure to pay feudal assessments owed to the nobles had seen a growing number of peasants being required to give up their farms. These now became vagrants who roamed the countryside. As the panic spread, so did the violence. When demands to end the required payments went unmet, the peasants took the only action they felt was left to them. They then moved to destroy the records listing their obligations to the nobles.

The political climate of the day added to the growing expectations of the general rural population. As the growing anticipation for change outpaced the reality of everyday life, rural France exploded to force at a quicker pace than in the cities. Peasants armed themselves and then moved against those they perceived to be unpatriotic aristocrats. The revolt spread from the west, southward to the Spanish border, as estate after estate came under attack.

The National Constituent Assembly finally became involved by the late summer of 1789. In August it moved to abolish the remaining vestiges of feudalism under its “August Decrees”. Many of the exclusive rights of hunting and grazing held by the nobles were abolished, as were much of the dues and tithes owed to the First and Second Estates. The “decrees” did much in the way of quelling the violence, but the turmoil would carry on into 1790. Eventually, the uprising was brought under control by local militias. The insurrection in rural France, coupled with the political revolt in Paris, and the support of the Assembly, cemented France on the road to change. In all, there were nineteen decrees, and these would set the foundation for equality and liberty.

Nobles across the country left France, either out of fear of attack, or due to the changing political climate. These “émigrés” would become the catalyst for the later “Counter-Revolution”. The loss of their privileged status in French society and threats to their estates pushed them toward the other extreme. They would eventually look to unite the counter-revolutionary forces within France and gain support from the other monarchies in Europe.

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**Declaration of Rights of Man and the Women’s March**

On the 26th of August, 1789 the National Constituent Assembly published the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. The document set forth a series of basic individual and shared rights for all the citizens of France contained as “one estate”. For all intensive purposes, legal social distinction was now abolished. The First Article
stated, “Men are born and remain free and equal in rights”. The roots of the document could be traced to the English philosopher John Locke’s “social contract”, and the fairly contemporary American Constitution.

The Second Article addressed the issue of national authority, stating that all sovereignty rested with the nation as a whole and not in the hands of any sole group or individual. In essence, the general will of the nation would now act to protect equality and society as a whole and remove special privilege. Taxation would no longer be the exclusive burden of the Third Estate, but would now be distributed on a more equitable level. The ideas of noble birth right and royal authority to decree rule, and that of “divine right” were abolished. The Church also lost its right to levy taxation on crops. Many of its special privileges were removed and there was widespread confiscation of Church lands that now became the property of the government. The Old Regime had come to an end.

The declaration had one glaring exemption. It did not address the question of women’s rights. While it provided for the freedoms of speech, of property, and of the press, and a lesser guarantee of religious freedoms, extending these to women was not seen as a pressing issue at the time. The question of those under slavery was also sidestepped.

In the interim, the king and the Assembly had removed to Versailles as the conditions in Paris had worsened. Bread shortages became an everyday occurrence and the greatest concern of homemakers. Women began to congregate in the market places and organize protests. When city officials failed to address their concerns, the women rallied around a march to Versailles. In October, some 7,000 women and men made the ten-mile trek to the palace, entered the main courtyard, and demanded to see the Queen (Marie Antoinette). When she appeared guns were raised, but no shot was fired. Despite their anger, most were overcome by her courage and she received their applause. Never-the-less, the royal family was forced to return to Paris with the crowd. The Assembly, which had been meeting at Versailles, returned to Paris as well.

Having shown themselves to be a force within the growing revolution, a petition for extending equal rights to women was presented to the Assembly. This “Women’s Petition” exposed what they saw as the hypocrisy under which the new order was being built. The petition met with no formal discussion by the Assembly, and the station of women in France would remain as it had been for over another century and a half.

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The Constitution of 1791

By 1790, the National Constituent Assembly was seriously attempting to develop a constitution for France. Within the Assembly, factions began to emerge and claim the authority of the people. The conservative nobles were opposed to forming a complete republic, preferring a government organized along the lines of the British parliamentary monarchy. This became known as the “Right Wing”. Those on the “right” looked to maintain the traditional authority within France, while the more radical elements within the Assembly wanted a clean break with the past and a more direct move toward a democratic republic, such as the one in the United States of America.

Across the country and especially within the military, dissent began to appear, and several small uprisings were forcibly put down. Promotion within the army had been
transformed and was now based on merit, and this estranged part of the officer corps, which began to move politically toward counter-revolutionary thinking. With the abolishing of hereditary offices, many nobles began to side with this element of the military as well. The nobles and certain elements within the military began to be viewed by the public as harboring counter-revolutionary sentiments. These would soon side with the émigrés and begin a counter-revolutionary movement.

Still, for a time a coalition of consensus was formed between the moderate members of the Assembly and the more radical elements on the political left. The “Royalists” on the right were able to maintain a sense of tradition when members of the Assembly were required to take an oath of loyalty to the nation, the law, and the king. Louis XVI and the royal court took part in these proceedings and it seemed that for a time the revolution would take an orderly course toward a peaceful and limited transition.

At this early stage, the majority of the Assembly supported the creation of a constitutional monarchy, as opposed to forming a republic. Under this arrangement, the king’s authority would be severely limited by the constitution, to which he would be required to take an oath to uphold. Any move to the contrary would be seen as treason and would force his abdication of the throne.

Not willing to accept the new reality of French politics, Louis XVI and the royal family attempted to flee Paris in hopes of finding refuge and support with forces under the command of General Bouillé, who was opposed to revolution. Disguised in servants clothing, the royal family was secreted out of Paris, but were caught the next day and escorted back to Paris in disgrace. They were held under armed guard as the National Constituent Assembly neared completion of a constitution.

In the meantime, a radical element in the Assembly known as the Jacobins began to exert their power with the formation of “The Mountain”, a group of powerful leaders that included Maximilien Robespierre and the radical journalist Jean-Paul Marat. Marat was becoming a growing voice and favorite of the people. The Mountain consisted of inflexible men of action, as opposed to the moderate Girondists, who were considered to be political theorists and political thinkers. The two factions would increasingly become rivals, rather than partners in the revolutionary movement against the king.

A petition was soon circulated condemning the exodus of the king as an act of abdication. Riots broke out across the city and the National Guard responded by firing on gathering crowds. As Parisians lay dead in the streets, radical elements began to condemn the measures of the Constituent government. This led to the ordered closing of the politically active “patriotic clubs” and many notable radicals were forced to flee the country or go into hiding, including the outspoken Marat.

In September of 1791, the king accepted the new constitution as the law of France. The new “French Constitution of 1791” took the Declaration of Rights as its preamble and divided power much like its American counterpart under a centralized government. The king was restored and granted veto power over the legislature within a representative democracy operating in the interests of the “general will of the people”. General elections were provided for to create the “Legislative Assembly” to replace the Constituent Assembly, and to check the power of the nobles and the king. The new assembly was divided into three distinct groups, the “Feuillants” who favored a constitutional monarchy, the “Girondists” who were liberal republicans, and the Jacobins who were radical uncompromising revolutionaries. About one third of the Assembly held
no affiliation with any group, and were independents. The Constitution of 1791 became the law of the land in the light of growing political division.

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Foreign Threats and War

The events in France did not go unnoticed in other European kingdoms. Throughout Europe there was growing concern that revolutionary elements in their own countries might be inspired by the successes in France. Coupled with the encouragement of French émigrés who had fled into neighboring countries, concern soon turned into decided action. The confiscation of its property had also led the Roman Catholic Church to look upon the “new” France with disfavor and distain.

The first to act were the Holy Roman Emperor and the King of Austria, Leopold II (Marie Antoinette’s brother), and Fredrick William II of Prussia. This “First Coalition” demanded the return of full status to Louis XVI as king, and the termination of the Assembly under threat of military action. A declaration of intent was produced calling for outside intervention in France to restore Louis XVI, if necessary. The stage was now set for the coming Revolutionary Wars with France.

The Declaration did little to help the French king, and actually became a uniting force within the revolutionary movement, which had been moving toward factionalism. The French people showed near complete indifference to the wishes of other nations and their kings, and their resolve was hardened behind the revolution by the foreign threat. For its part, the Assembly viewed the document as Europe’s pronouncement for coming war. Louis XVI viewed the possibility of war with Austria as a way to gain more power and support from the people. Others in France saw the possibility of war as a way to export the revolution abroad.

By the summer of 1792, Leopold II had died and France had declared war on Austria. Prussia soon joined the fray and Prussian forces invaded France. The invaders had early success, but at the Battle of Valmy they were defeated and forced to withdraw from France. The reformed French Army had proven that it could defend the nation against external attack. The short-lived war was a sign of things to come and would instigate a move toward expanding French militarism, initially to protect the “Revolution”. The end result was that French militarism would grow to become supreme in Europe during the following decade. The wars would also see the ascent of Napoleon Bonaparte as a national hero. He would later move to exploit his popularity politically.

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The National Convention

With the military threats against the state, the Paris Commune, which held political control over Paris, began to take action independent of the Legislative Assembly’s authority. As a constitutional crisis developed the Assembly collapsed and the “Commune” moved to seize the royal family. The Paris Commune now declared itself all-powerful within the city limits and set about protecting the Revolution by creating lists, naming enemies of the “Revolution”. The Commune authorized house-to-house
searches and soon the prisons of Paris were full. Included in these arrests were many Catholic priests and political enemies of the Commune members, as well as personal rivals.

When word reached Paris that the Prussian Army had taken Verdun, and was marching toward the capital, hysteria swept over the city. Mobs of citizens, encouraged by the Commune, moved against the prisons and attacked the inmates, who were thought to be sympathetic to the invaders and counter-revolutionaries. All across the city hundreds of prisoners were carried from their cells and executed. In many cases their heads were removed and placed on pikes to be paraded through the streets. By the time order was restored the “September Massacres” had seen the murder of over half the prisoners in Paris, regardless of the charges against them or their crimes.

Earlier in July, the Prussian Duke of Brunswick had issued a declaration demanding the restoration of Louis XVI. This “Brunswick Manifesto” threatened retaliation against the population of Paris if any harm came to the royal family. This coupled with a later “Declaration” led many to link the king with conspiring with foreign governments to overthrow the Revolution. By the time the Austrian and Prussian coalition forces had been defeated at Valmy, the fate of the king of France had been sealed.

With the end of the Legislative Assembly, the first general election was held in September of 1792 and the “National Convention” became the new governing legislative body of France. The Convention immediately moved to abolish the monarchy in France and declared the nation a republic. This in effect invalidated the Constitution of 1791 and the National Convention was charged with creating a new constitution.

The removal of the king from power created a contradiction of power. The National Convention now held both legislative and executive powers. This new “revolutionary government” intensified the divisions between the political factions in the government. Coupled with the threat of war, the process of creating a new constitution was postponed and the National Convention extended and prolonged its power. The Revolution would soon turn bloody.

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**End of the Monarchy**

In December of 1792, the “National Convention” addressed the issue of the king’s loyalty to the nation. The Paris Commune had been holding the royal family as “prisoners of the state” for the last six months. Many believed that Louis XVI had conspired with foreign monarchies to overthrow the new order. The National Convention voted 433 to 288 to execute the king for treason. The official charge was “conspiracy against the public liberty and the general safety”. On January 21, 1793 Louis XVI was led to the square of the renamed “Place de la Revolution” where a guillotine had been erected.

The king stepped to the top of the scaffolding and turned to address the large crowd that had gathered to see the death of their king. Convicted of high treason and crimes against the state, Louis XVI declared his innocence and pardoned those about to execute him. He then declared he was willing to die for France, but “prayed that France would be spared his fate”. He was then hurriedly secured and executed. Queen Marie Antoinette was executed in the same fashion the following October (1793). Louis XVI had spoken
prophetic words, but few understood them at the time. Many in the new government and in the country as a whole would suffer his fate in the year to come.

The execution of the king would define the rift between those in the National Assembly who wanted to see a constitutional monarchy, and those that wanted to establish a republic. After Louis XVI’s execution, there was no turning back to the past. The monarchy in France was ended. France would from this point forward be a republic, or would it? Across the country reaction was mixed. Most had only known a government that included a king. Revolutionists saw the execution as the final move toward political freedom, while monarchist saw it as the last straw. Outside the country, European monarchies were shocked and prepared plans to force a change in France.

In 1793, the National Convention became the “de facto” government of France, charged with writing a new constitution. The French “Constitution of 1793” was drafted and ratified by public referendum. Due to outstanding internal and external concerns the Constitution never went into effect. Riots across the land over military conscription and concerns about the Church forced its initial delay. Soon, those in power would usurp the new constitution to strengthen their own authority.

The Reign of Terror

The execution of Louis XVI united much of Europe against the Revolution, expanding the “First Coalition” to include Spain, the Netherlands, and Great Britain. In 1793, a new invasion of France by foreign armies had begun. France responded by implementing a policy of conscription. The ranks of the French army swelled to over twelve hundred thousand, too outnumber their enemies.

The early stages of the new war did not go well for France. Military reversals sparked revolts in the countryside, leading to rebellion in several cities and counter-revolutionary activities in others. Those known as the “Sans-culottes”, representing poorer Frenchmen, united with the Jacobins giving them public support, especially in Paris. With this new support the radical Jacobins carried out an insurrection and ousted the Girondists. The radical Jacobins and their San-culottes supporters now became the base of political power in France.

To protect the country and the Revolution against its enemies, the Convention now under Jacobin control, created the “Committee of Public Safety” in the spring of 1793. Under the supervision of a twelve-man board, the committee set about ridding the French Republic of its internal enemies. Thus began a year and a half period of trials and executions that had more to do with eliminating rivals, enemies, and political opponents, than it did with protecting the Republic.

Under Robespierre, the “Committee” would carry out the “Reign of Terror” during which tens of thousands would be charged as “enemies of the state”, quickly tried, and then executed. For over a year, the executions proceeded. Anyone suspected or accused of counter-revolutionary activities or sentiments was immediately investigated, with many of these placed in the custody of the “Committees”. Most found their fate in an early grave, while others died in prison waiting for trial. In essence, the revolution had begun to turn on itself.
What caused this violent introspection and “witch-hunt” that led to so many arrests and executions? Historians point to a growing struggle for power between the political factions, as well as a power struggle in the higher realms of the new government. Events in Paris emboldened the Jacobins to take control of the Convention. From there, they called for a political and administrative cleansing. With the support of the National Guard, the Jacobins seized power and then moved to limit voting for Convention members to themselves and the Sans-culottes. The assassination of the outspoken Jacobin Jean-Paul Marat further bolstered the Jacobins as they took control of the Committee for Public Safety and instigated a purge. The “purge” led to removal of the Girondin leadership and the rise of the Sans-culottes into a position of power. In many cases, the Jacobins and the Sans-culottes were one and the same.

The Revolution’s new leadership now had to deal with what it perceived as a domestic insurrection. The “Law of Suspects” was passed and the Revolutionary Tribunal was established to deal with the internal threats to the Revolution. Robespierre was ruthless in his efforts to root-out any counter-revolutionary activity, real or perceived. He would eventually become a victim of his own thoroughness as the purge spiraled out of control. In the meantime, Robespierre targeted the ultra-radical and moderate elements within the Jacobin ranks for elimination.

The Thermidorian Reaction

By 1793, the Revolution had reached such a fevered pitch, that the new government had instituted a new calendar and changed the names of the months and was now dating the years beginning with the execution of the king. Thus 1793 became year “One”, the year the Republic was established. The radicalism did not stop there. A new religious understanding was created, known as the “Cult of the Supreme Being”, held in the light of Enlightenment Deism. To show their support of the Revolution, parents were expected to baptize their children in the name of the liberty, equality, and fraternity, the maxim of the French Revolution.

The “Thermidorian Reaction” of 1794, named after the month of Thermidor (July) in the “new revolutionary calendar”, was a response to the excesses of the purge. The Committee of Public Safety ordered the execution of Robespierre and other leading members of the “Terror”. The internal threat seemed to have been dealt with, including the threat of those that initiated the great bloodshed. Control of the government now swung back to the Girondists.

There was also the threat from monarchists. Within France, more than a few within the aristocracy and nobles looked to restore the country to royalists. Their fortunes had taken a downward turn with the Revolution, and they believed that royalty and the nobility had the only legitimate claim to power. They began a further clandestine effort to bring other powers in Europe to help in their cause. This was a “real” threat to the Revolution, and to France herself.

To the other monarchies in Europe, the French Revolution posed a threat to their own power. If allowed to succeed, they feared that radical elements in their own countries would be encouraged to revolt. This belief had earlier led Prussia and Austria into war with France. Their defeat at the Battle of Valmy by a largely conscripted French Army
had saved the new French Republic. Britain, Holland, and Spain soon joined in the war against the Republic as the “Second Coalition”.

The Directory

In the aftermath of the Thermidorian Reaction, the National Convention proposed the Constitution of Year III (1795), in reference to the new French calendar. Once again, a national referendum was held and over one million Frenchmen voted for its passage. The provincial assemblies in France moving for its approval, and in September it became law. Along with forming a bicameral legislature, the new Constitution created an executive committee known as the Directoire (Directory). Its five members would be appointed by annual elections and were viewed as a move toward “separation of powers”. A decree was then issued that two-thirds of the new legislature be culled from members of the previous National Convention. To complicate public indignation, the new law forbid armed assemblies, public meetings, and political clubs and societies. This restriction of democracy and the imposed control of local authorities raised resentment in France and revolt soon followed.

Did the Constitution of 1793 signal the end of the Revolution and stabilization of the government? It might well have, but the Directory that it created became a symbol of chaos and indecision. Its members repeatedly overstepped the limits of the Constitution. As time passed, the Directory’s corruption became more apparent, and resentment toward it grew. The Directory reacted with efforts to protect its power. Napoleon was called to Paris and successfully protected the government, and the Directory was able to maintain its precarious position of power by force.

As war with the Second Coalition unfolded, the military successes of the French Army bolstered the Directory’s power. Napoleon, who had returned to the front, brought victories in Italy and territory was ceded to France. Her enemies then began to sue for peace. By 1797, England was also forced to make concessions to France, but the country remained in a state of war with Austria, Russia, and England as well. Eventually, the military gained greater power and prestige. Napoleon led the army to many of its victories, and he began to come into a position of prominence. The power of the Directory began to shift toward the military, in particular toward Napoleon, who had now become a national hero. All of France outside of the government now looked upon the military, and Napoleon in particular, as the protector and strength of the Republic.

From Consulate to Emperor

The Directory’s corruption and civil suppression continued to undermine its effectiveness, and resentment toward it increased. With military setbacks in 1798 and 1799, the stage was set for change. In November 1799, Napoleon made his move for political power. He led a military coup d’état and overthrew the Directory. There was little opposition in the country considering his elevated status. The preceding years of democracy had been filled with turbulence and disorder and the country was ready for the
leadership of a strong individual such as Napoleon. Further, he had national appeal as a military and national hero.

Napoleon was cautious, and he moved methodically to secure his power. The day after the coup, remnants of the National Convention abolished the Constitution of Year III, then ordained a three-man “Consulate” to head a new government for France. The coup had thus gained legal status, and Napoleon was appointed as one of the consuls. The new government also contained three parliamentary assemblies, but as Napoleon moved to consolidate his power, both they and the other consuls would be left with little more than titles in submissive roles.

Napoleon’s first move was to place himself above the other consuls. This was done when a public referendum confirmed him as First Consul (supreme). He appealed to the French people as the statesman the country needed. He promised a government of competence, justice, order, and moderation. When Napoleon scored military victories over the “Second Coalition” in 1800, his popularity grew. He now realized the opportunity to further consolidate his power. As First Consul, Napoleon used his authority to annul the assemblies and make a consolidated “Senate” the single legislative institution.

In 1802, the Republic still existed, albeit nothing more than a shadow of its former self. That year, Napoleon moved to make his position permanent. In another national referendum, he was appointed “First Consul for life”. The Constitution of Year X was then passed, legalizing Napoleon’s new status. For all intensive purposes, France was now a dictatorship. It still had the outward façade of a Republic, but all real power, be it political or military, now rested in the hands of Napoleon. Napoleon then moved to establish peace treaties with the enemies of France. Napoleon’s new government was now seen in an even more favorable light, having brought peace as well as stability to the country.

A period of prosperity settled over France as the economy soared, wages were on the rise, and shortages of commodities became a thing of the past. Napoleon was given credit, and he eagerly accepted it. Even in these circumstances there were those that saw Napoleon for what he was – a tyrant. He would make further political moves to solidify his power. It should be understood that Napoleon’s rise to and consolidation of power was in no small part predicated on the history of a country that had known rule by one individual (the king) for centuries. Many were ready for a strong ruler who would restore order and prosperity to a land that had known little of either during the Revolution.

Like the kings that had come before him, Napoleon was jealous of any that opposed his authority. His government would suppress any questioning of his authority. Those that opposed him in the Senate were driven out. Napoleon’s political rivals were either framed, or found to be involved in plots against him, and summarily exiled. Opposition in the military was dealt with by redirecting the Republican Army to fight to protect French colonial possessions. The press was suppressed as well and publication of derogatory editorials became a thing of the past. During all of this, the French people stood solidly behind their “great general”.
The New Emperor of France

When a Royalist conspiracy to have him assassinated was uncovered, Napoleon took the opportunity to arrest the remaining opponents to his regime. One by one Republican advocates, monarchists, and émigrés who had returned to the country were detained, and either imprisoned or executed. Later, when a new conspiracy against him was uncovered, the people of France showered an outpouring of adulation and affection on their First Consul. With his position and national support now secure, Napoleon would take the next step in his consolidation of absolute power.

Napoleon took this national exaltation by the public as a sign to make his final and boldest political move. In May of 1804, the Senate voted to bestow the title of “emperor” upon him. A national referendum was held and Napoleon was then given an approval of the position of emperor by the French people. As Napoleon place the crown upon his own head, the “French Empire” began and the Republic died. The short lived First French Republic had outlived its usefulness due to its own factionalism, corruption, and individual lust for power. Napoleon was both the result from, and epitome of that quandary.

When the pope moved to place the crown upon his head, Napoleon took the crown and placed it on his own head. This last act of defiance was a show of his own “absolute power”. The Revolution had come full circle. The Revolution had started with a king sitting on the throne of France. He had then been deposed and a constitution had created a republic. The execution of the royals insured that the monarchy would not return. However, once Napoleon became emperor, a new form of royalty came into being. In a little more than a decade, France had replaced her king with an emperor. As emperor, Napoleon was hard to distinguish from Louis XVI. His government became every bit as repressive and opulent as the monarchy that had proceeded him the decade before.

Just like the kings before him, Napoleon’s success would be measured though his military and economic policies. His early military successes had endeared the country to him. His political and economic achievements as emperor would then fulfilled the country’s aspirations. As he led the country to European dominance in the first decade of the 19th century, his fame and adoration knew no limits in France. Even after his defeat and first exile, Napoleon would become a rallying point for the greatness that France aspired to upon his short return.

The “Seventh Coalition” would finally bring a complete end to Napoleon’s reign over France in 1815. By that time he had already subjugated much of the European continent at least once, instituted a comprehensive “common law” (Napoleonic Code) across Europe, and brought economic prosperity to France. Even after his final defeat and permanent exile, Napoleon would be held in and ascend the glory of Charlemagne. In the decades to follow, his ancestors would come to rule France and lead the country back to prosperity and prominence in Europe.
Conclusions

What had happened to the democratic ideals that had launched the Revolution in 1789? Was revolution in France and in Europe for that matter, inevitable? Why had the first French Republic failed? The answers to these questions can be found in the history of France, the progression of the Revolution, and in the people who controlled events.

The ideals that were at the foundation of the Revolution never really died. Those ideals were as strong in 1804 as they were in 1789. The people of France still yearned for a republic of liberty and equality. However, as the Revolution unfolded, social, economic, and military events turned the French Revolution in directions that neither its leaders, nor the country had anticipated.

The history of royal entitlement and absolutism was also a major factor in directing events. For monarchists, the idea of a republic was foreign and unacceptable. Their repeated attempts to undermine the Revolution and then the French Republic were a constant threat to democracy in France. Even after Napoleon forced his way into power, there were monarchist plots to deal with.

The finances of the country had been bankrupted by the kings leading up to and including Louis XVI. The republican governments that followed had just as little financial credibility as the kings that had preceded them. Corruption in the new government further complicated the financial problems. The military conflicts that followed the removal of the king placed greater strains on the French economy.

The social conflict that was the “Great Fear” was pushed by not only hunger and threats to food supplies, but also by the history of a repressive aristocracy. The purge that was the “Reign of Terror” advanced the demise of the French Republic and weakened the fragile unity of the Revolutionary ranks. Monarchist elements in the country used these events to strengthen their efforts to return the country to a traditional government under a king.

Napoleon used the political situation in France to finally destroy the Republic. He was helped by the disunity of the revolutionaries and the republicans. He used his popularity and his ability to turn the economy around to rid the French people of their desire for true democracy. Once again, France came under the rule of an omnipotent head of state. France ended up under the control of an emperor, rather than a king. In the end, neither was what was necessary for a country that aspired toward democracy. It would take the formation of several “republic” to finally create a permanent democracy in France.

Further Readings and Credits

A comprehensive understanding of the French Revolution can be found in J.M. Roberts, The French Revolution, (Oxford, 1978). Adrian Gilbert’s The French Revolution, (London, 2003) also presents a more contemporary address to the events between 1789 and 1804. The French Revolution, 1787-1799; From the Storming of the Bastille to Napoleon (London, 1989), by Albert Soboul presents a political perspective of the