



# French Revolution: Timeline, Causes & Summary

## The French Revolution Summary

It is often said that the victor is the author of history in the French Revolution, and as such, it is often biased. That may be true, but one must realize the larger problem that this statement implies. History is often reduced for the sake of narrative; whether that favors the victor or the loser is merely an afterthought. The culture does not engage with history for its historical value but instead for the spellbinding tales that move them. It serves not as a discourse into the sociological philosophical bindings of civilization but for the escapist amusement of contemporary ideals. All art is a product of its time, and that extends to [historical](#) literature as well.

One of the prime examples of this phenomenon is the French Revolution. Chances are you've often heard of it in casual conversation. Unfortunately, it is mostly referenced as a courtesy, used only to utter the idiom that is the cause of its popularity: "Let them eat cake."

The famous line labels anyone slightly aristocratic as evil and the proletariat as the victim. There is something inherently wrong with treating history for anecdotal value – in this case, it simplifies complex class relations of not just late-18th century [France](#) – but of all civilizations, homogenizing them in a way that renders their validity, philosophical rigor, and their unique compositions obsolete.



## The French Revolution



The French Revolution is a victim of this anecdotal revision of history, which is quite surprising since it also happens to be one of the most important events in modern European history. The French Revolution, which began in 1789, started finding its rhythm in 1787 and brought about political and societal changes that would change the



French landscape forever. It is also known as the “**Revolution of 1789**,” distinguishing it from the latter revolutions of 1830 and 1848.

The French Revolution has a lot in common with most Western revolutions that occurred near the tail end of the 18th century. Feudalism, which had pervaded Europe in the High [Middle Ages](#), was witnessing its ultimate demise. In most parts of Europe, the bourgeoisie was weeded out, and merchants and manufacturers started taking ownership of the land. With the economic tide shifting in favor of the commoners.

The standard of living and general awareness among the masses increased. During this time, the Enlightenment took hold of the region, and intellectuals like Voltaire and Montesquieu were pointing out the absurdity of the economic and political systems. These philosophies had a wider reach in France than anywhere else in Europe. The peasants wanted to purge the plague of feudalism and roam the land as landowners.

The lifestyle of the proletariat had changed, which prompted an unprecedented increase in the European population, almost doubling it during the 18th century. A greater population meant greater consumption of food, fuel, and other commodities, and crop failures were occurring widely in France – essentially, an economic crisis was imminent. To deal with the economic burden, the French rulers sought to tax the bourgeoisie. Power rarely yields of its own volition, and the French aristocracy was no exception.

## France in the American Revolutionary War





The French participation in the American Revolution had aided the economic crisis further. The strain was too much, and the French monarchy could not respond adequately to the pressure. The [revolution](#) started to take shape when the controller of finances, Charles-Alexandre de Calonne, proposed reforms for eliminating the budget deficit by taxing the aristocracy. The privileged classes were not too pleased with the idea, but Calonne's successors proceeded with the plan, which led to an eventual revolt by the aristocratic bodies.

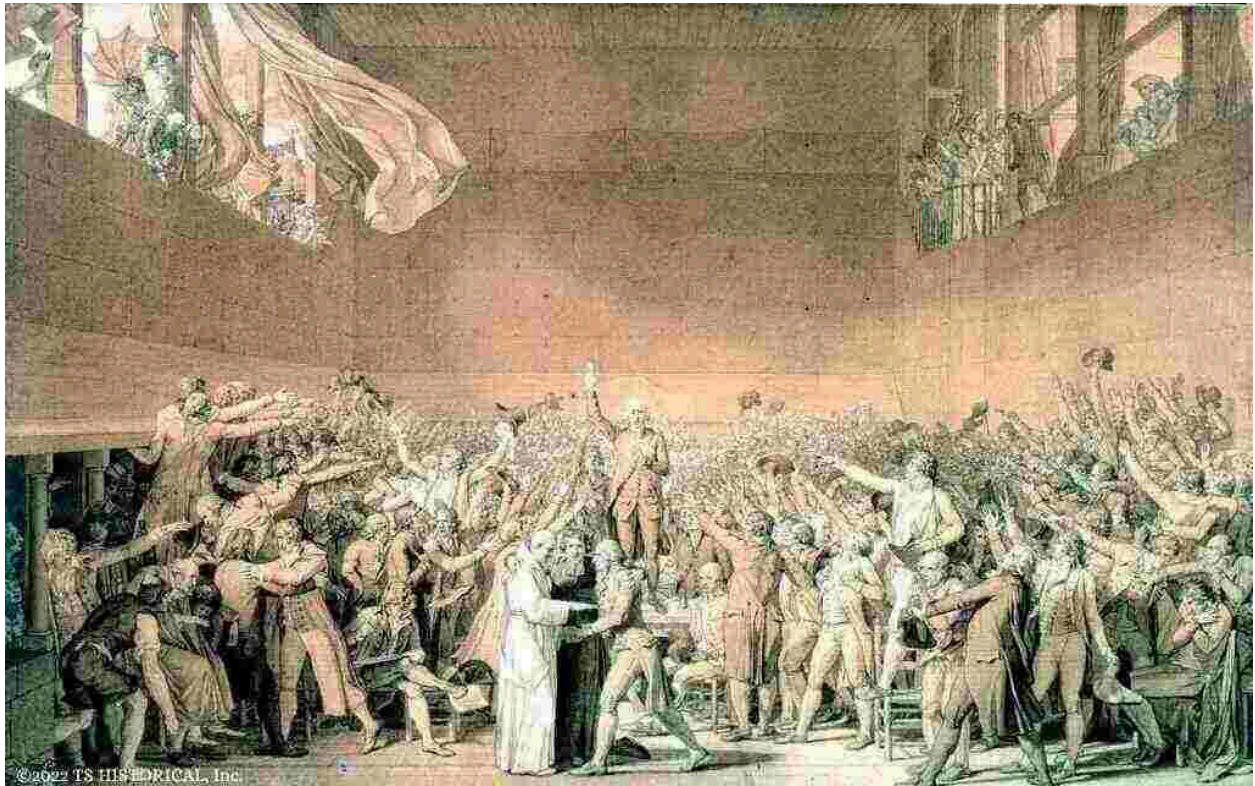
In 1789, elections were held for the Estates-General – a body consisting of the clergy, the aristocracy, and the commoners. King Louis XVI gave free rein to the press, who labeled the event as a reconstruction of the state. The electors elected 300 individuals for the clergy, 300 for the nobility, and 600 deputies for the commoners, known as the Third Estate. The Estates-General convened in May of 1789.

A fundamental issue tore the assembly right down the centerline. When discussing how the voting process should work, the clergy and the aristocrats claimed that the assembly should vote by the estate, whereas the commoners wanted to vote by head – or individual members.

If the assembly voted by the head, the Third Estate could outvote the other two bodies on any issue. Similarly, if voted by the estate, the other two bodies could outvote the Third Estate. After the constant back-and-forth, the Third Estate threatened to declare itself the National Assembly. They had support from the church, so they could do so.



## Tennis Court Oath



On the 20th of June, the commoners were locked out of the regular meeting hall. They swore to write a new constitution for France. The king had to yield once again, and he convinced the nobles and the clergy to join the National Assembly. In July, the assembly was renamed “National Constituent Assembly.” But the king was not as honest and endearing towards the Third Estate as his decision presented him to be. The political instability was mounting pressure on the king when another problem reared its ugly head: lack of food supplies.

The harvest of 1788 had been inefficient, and the food problems were not going to go away. The king started to assemble armies under cover of the night. Rumors started to circulate, questioning the motivations of the king.



The notion on the streets was that an aristocratic conspiracy was underway, and the king and the nobility had teamed up to oust the Third Estate. This brought on the Great Fear of July 1789, when peasants – in a fit of panic and desperation – revolted because of the gathering of troops and took control of Bastille, a large fortress that was a symbol of the Old Regime.

The event proved that the peasants were much more dangerous and had much more authority than the bourgeoisie had given them credit for. Basking in their newfound street power, the peasants started to revolt against their lords in the countryside and provinces. If left to its own devices, the social phenomenon was only going to gain momentum. So, the nobility decided to stop it in its tracks, even if it meant sacrificing a little for the sake of saving the rest.

In August, the National Constituent Assembly abolished the feudal regime and presented the “Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen.” The new document was a novel and unprecedented concept that would have undermined the monarchy and the status quo, and the abolishment of the feudal system would further disrupt the system.

The king did not sanction either reform. By September, the food shortage and declining economy were making citizens uneasy. In October, some protestors seized weapons from Hotel de Ville and marched toward Versailles. For the sake of safety, the king had to be relocated to Paris.

The Royal Apartments were ransacked, and the National Constituent Assembly moved to Paris. The values of Enlightenment started to shape political thought in France. Civil equality, fraternity, brotherhood, and other humane values started to emerge in the political stratosphere. The administrative structure was overhauled: the country was divided into districts and communes.

The National Constituent Assembly was making major changes but did not want to overdo it and risk stability in the process. So, they created a system where the monarch would rule with the assembly instead of being a supervising power that makes the final decision. King Louis was not fond of sharing his power, which led to outcomes that could have been easily avoided.



The majority of the male population became eligible to vote, and the land of the Roman Catholic Church was nationalized to pay off public debt. As a result, the Church became weaker and more susceptible to reformation ideas.

The National Constituent Assembly wanted to reorganize the [Church](#) – an idea met with stern resistance from the clergy. The qualities of the French proletariat brought about significant changes, and their effects rippled out throughout the Western world, especially the United States. It gave hope to the revolutionaries in [Britain](#), [Germany](#), [Italy](#), and [Austria](#) to rise and take what was rightfully theirs.

The National Constituent Assembly floated the idea of international law that allowed people the right to self-determination, fuelling many discussions and heated debates. Ironically, the king gave his full support to the idea.

The reason for doing so was that a war with one of its European neighbors would strengthen the French resolve in the monarchy. If the war were to go well for the French, they would appreciate their king; if it were to go badly, a foreign power would help him escape.

## **Austria – Conflicts with revolutionary France**





In April 1792, France declared war against Austria. Initially, the Austro-Prussian union proved challenging for the French. Marie Antoinette, the French queen, had an Austrian heritage, and so, she contacted Leopold II, the Holy [Roman Emperor](#), to invade France.

This strategy would give power to the nobility and suppress the rising lower and middle classes. As a response, the progressive factions of the French rose and took control of the Tuileries Palace, taking the royal family prisoners.

The Parisians massacred the nobles and clergy in the prisons and defeated the Prussians. A new assembly – the National Convention – was introduced, whose first order of business was abolishing the monarchy and establishing a republic based on liberal democratic principles. They condemned Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette to death and guillotined them in 1793 – six months apart.

In the second phase of the war, the French had gotten the better of its adversaries, but the third phase – in 1793 – saw France suffer defeats at the hands of the First Coalition, consisting of Britain, Austria, and Prussia. After the defeats, a radical set of policies arrived in the National Convention.

It taxed the rich, employed government control of prices, and declared education free and compulsory for everyone. It was a progressive move that received a severe backlash. Thus began the Reign of Terror that eradicated the conservative elements of the society aimed at maintaining the financial status quo.





## Reign of Terror



The Reign of Terror ended in 1794 and was responsible for executing 16,600 people in Paris and its provinces – and imprisoning many more. In the fourth phase of the war, France emerged victorious against the Austrians. After the victory, retrospect rendered the Reign of Terror foolish.

The National Convention regressed on the ideas of the Reign of Terror, abandoning the principles of the social and economic fraternity at the same time. Soon afterward, executive power was given to a Directory of five individuals, and the legislative power was given to two bodies. The changing tides prevented any system from settling in. The liberal and conservative approaches locked heads, often leading to wars and civil uprisings – not just in France but also in Europe.



In the final years of the 18th century, [Napoleon Bonaparte](#) abolished the Directory and became the first consul of France. The introduction of the Consulate marks the end of the French Revolutionary Period.

However, the effects of the French Revolution were colossal and far-reaching. It started as a response to the egregious inequality inherent in the feudal system and evolved into a quest for universal equality. It gave birth to the first liberal democracy in history and left a model that would soon be adopted across Europe and, eventually, around the globe.

The principles presented by the intellectuals of the Enlightenment were not short of revolutionary for modern social and political thought. For instance, Montesquieu was responsible for the idea of separating different branches of government. In his book, “The Spirit of the Laws,” he lays the foundation for almost every modern government in the world.

He divided the political powers into legislative, executive, and judicial, maintaining that they work soundly and independently and be able to harmonize political thought. Furthermore, it was responsible for defining and promoting individual freedoms. What a shame, then, that such an event is trivialized for the sake of anecdotes.

