French Revolution 1789–1795

**EVENTS**

- **May 1789** King Louis XVI of France calls a meeting of the Estates General (elected body of representatives from the three estates of French society; last convened in 1614) to solve financial crisis. Dispute begins over members’ powers.

- **Jun 1789** Representatives of Third Estate declare themselves a National Assembly and swear, in the Tennis Court Oath, to draw up a new constitution for France. Members of First and Second Estates join the National Assembly.

- **Jul 1789** The Bastille (armory and political prison in Paris) is stormed by citizens after rumors that the king intends to suppress the National Assembly. Radicals form Paris Commune (to govern city) and National Guard volunteer force (to protect revolution). The Great Fear: peasant mobs overrun rural estates; many nobles leave France. (They are known as émigrés.)

- **Aug 1789** Rule of National Assembly begins (to Oct 1791). New constitution is put down by young army officer Maximilien Robespierre. First Estate (princes and prelates) and Second Estate (nobility) cede their rights. Third Estate (merchants, manufacturers, and professionals) claim rights of all citizens. Liberty, Equality, Brotherhood.

- **Sep 1791** National Assembly issues a new constitution specifying a constitutional monarchy with an elected legislative body (Legislative Assembly), an elected judiciary, and laws based on the Declaration of the Rights of Man.

- **Oct 1791** Rule of Legislative Assembly begins (to Sep 1792): first elected body to rule France. Main parties on left include Girondists and Jacobins; on right, Royalists.

- **Aug 1792** The Tuileries (Louis’s Parisian palace) is stormed by revolutionary mob. Louis’s constitutional authority is suspended; royal family is imprisoned.

- **Sep 1792** September Massacres. Nobles held in Parisian prisons are executed without trial.

- **Sept 1792** Rule of National Convention begins (to Oct 1795): new assembly composed of republicans. Convention abolishes the monarchy and declares France a republic.

- **Jan 1793** Louis XVI is tried and executed. Royalist peasant rebellions break out in rural areas.

- **1793–1794** The Reign of Terror (height of the French Revolution). Convention gives dictatorial powers to nine-member Committee of Public Safety (dominated by Maximilien Robespierre, leader of Jacobins). Commissars of committee suppress counterrevolutionary movements by force; widespread execution of political opponents and nobles.

- **1794–1795** National Convention denounces and executes Robespierre and followers. Public opinion forces National Convention to adopt more moderate policies and end the Terror. Power of Jacobin Club is broken; Paris Commune closes.

- **1795** Rule of Directory begins (to 1799) an executive of five directors and two elected legislative bodies under a new constitution agreed to by the National Convention. Opposition to new constitution is put down by young army officer Napoleon Bonaparte.

**THE THREE ESTATES**

Before the Revolution of 1789, French society was divided into three classes called estates. Members of the Third Estate were denied the privileges of the First and Second Estates. Revolutionaries fought against the injustice of this system, known as the Old Regime.

- **First Estate** Members of clergy of the Catholic Church (about 1 percent of population)
  - Exempt from taxation
  - Owned 20 percent of the land
  - Received annual payment of 10 percent of all citizens’ income

- **Second Estate** Members of the nobility (about 2 percent of population)
  - Little or no taxation
  - Owned most of the land
  - Exclusively entitled to all powerful positions in government and army
  - Received money and crops (called feudal dues) from people who farmed their lands

- **Third Estate** Everybody else, from peasants to wealthy middle-class merchants and professionals (more than 97 percent of population)
  - Subject to taxation, high rents, and payment of feudal dues
  - No voice in government

**MAIN REPUBLICAN GROUPS OF THE NATIONAL CONVENTION**

- **The Mountain** (Members who sat on high benches at back of the assembly)
  - Radical republicans advocating centralized republican government and redistribution of wealth
  - Dominated by members of radical Jacobin Club (called “Watchdogs of the Revolution”), including Maximilien Robespierre
  - Came to dominate the National Convention

- **The Plain** (Members who sat on main floor of the assembly)
  - Moderate republicans opposed to central government and redistribution of wealth
  - Dominated by Girondists (members from the Gironde region of France) and later by the Mountain, under Robespierre