

FRENCH REVOLUTION

1715 TO 1794

REIGN OF LOUIS XV TO DEATH OF ROBESPIERRE

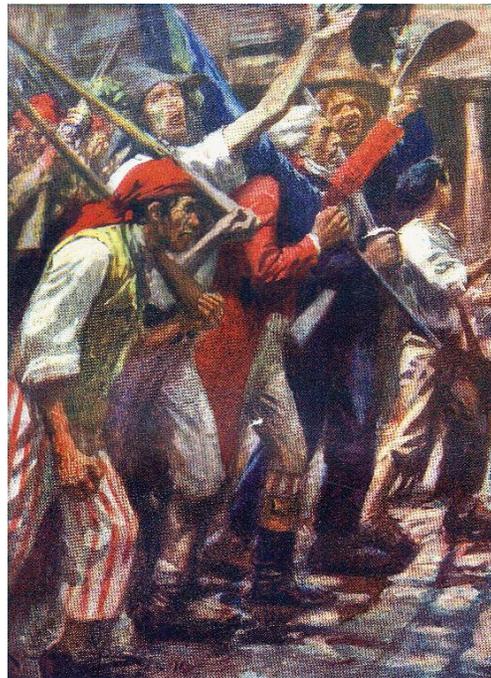
The road to hell is paved with good intentions.

—St Bernard of Clairvaux

ERA SUMMARY – FRENCH REVOLUTION

The [French Revolution](#) is one of the most dramatic periods of Western history. It occurred shortly after the American Revolution and was inspired by the successful example of the United States and also by notions of social reform put forth by "Enlightenment" philosophers. Although many of the French reformers had the best of intentions, the revolution eventually fell under the control of the most vicious and fanatical elements. Thousands of French citizens were murdered and their property confiscated. Tens of thousands more perished due to civil wars and anarchy. The revolution influenced subversive agitators far beyond the border of France and inspired political upheavals throughout the following century.

The Enlightenment and the Ancient Regime—During the period before the French Revolution, influential thinkers such as [Voltaire](#) and [Rousseau](#) helped popularize "enlightenment" ideas. This movement advanced the idea that society could be improved by abandoning faith and tradition and promoting scientific and rational methods. Unfortunately, the political activists of the enlightenment era included many persons of poor characters, including anarchists, atheists, and libertines. All agreed the existing government and clergy was corrupt and in need of reform, but many of the most ardent revolutionary leaders such as [Mirabeau](#), [Danton](#), and especially the [Duke of Orleans](#) were depraved and dissolute. Many leaders were also involved in secret societies, such as Freemasonry, that conspired to overthrow religious authorities. It was largely due to this pre-existing network of conspirators that the revolution took a radical turn.



'TO THE BASTILLE! TO THE BASTILLE.'

The French king who had the misfortune to rule during the French revolution was [Louis XVI](#), an earnest, but not entirely competent monarch. Most of the problems of the French monarchy can better be attributed to his grandfather, Louis XV, a self-indulgent monarch, whose 60 year reign saw the loss of both prestige and territory. He emptied the treasury, levied oppressive taxes, and encouraged the already luxurious and dissolute French aristocracy to new levels of

decadence and profligacy. Although Louis XVI was a personally pious king, the French clergy of his time was composed almost entirely of irreligious nobles, accountable to regional aristocrats rather than the Pope. Unsurprisingly, anti-clerical and anti-Royalist sentiments thrived in this environment, especially among the intelligentsia.

Early Years of the Revolution—The French Revolution began when Louis XVI called for a National Assembly to address a financial crisis. This caused great excitement and there were early demonstrations by the Paris mob, including the storming of the Bastille and the march of 7000 women on Versailles. Nevertheless, the National Assembly began in an orderly fashion and made a number of worthy reforms. It also decided that in order to pay off its national debt all Church property should be confiscated and sold to creditors. Not content to merely strip the Church of its wealth, the Assembly took the additional step of nationalizing the Church and forcing all priests to sign an oath of loyalty.



MARIE ANTOINETTE

The events in France during the early stages of the Revolution were alarming to the aristocracy because of the strong republican leanings of many representatives. Many left France and encouraged other European monarchies to oppose the revolution. For the first few years most governments of Europe took a "wait-and-see" approach, but they became increasingly troubled as the French radicals worked to limit royal power. By 1791 the French Royal family was unofficially held captive in the Tuileries palace, and in June, when they tried to flee the country, they were forcibly returned and imprisoned.

After sitting for over two years, the National Assembly called for the election of a Legislative Assembly that would rule along with the king. Unfortunately, the composition of the new Assembly was more radical than its predecessor and the poor treatment of the king alarmed both moderates within France and foreign governments. The result was a legislature divided between the radical "Jacobin" wing and the aristocratic-republican "Girondist" party. The Assembly's increasing hostility towards the monarchy and tendency toward lawless confiscation of wealth discouraged many well-respected leaders, and several, including Revolutionary War hero [Lafayette](#), deserted the Republican cause. Eventually these "émigrés" convinced Austria and her allies to invade France and restore the power to the king.

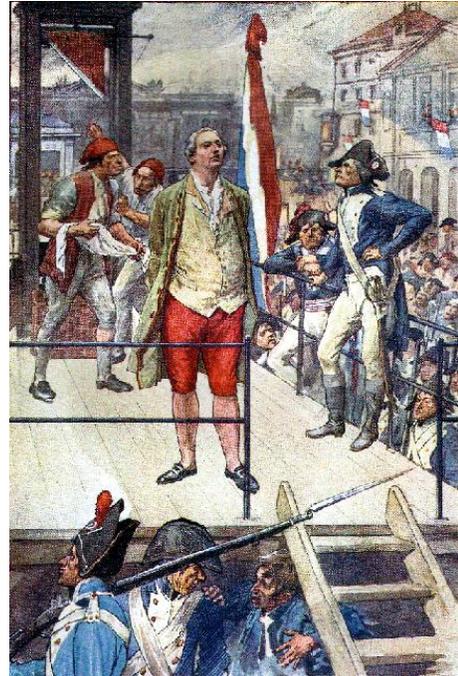
The Reign of Terror—In the summer of 1792, as Austrian and Prussian troops approached France, there was panic among republican radicals who knew they would lose power and perhaps be arrested if France were invaded. They began to jail suspected Royalist sympathizers, deposed the King, and in early September, after the fall of Verdun, thousands of suspected loyalist sympathizers were massacred. Just a few weeks later, the French army won a great

victory at Valmy, and the Legislative Assembly declared itself to be a Republic. The Assembly was renamed the National Convention and it now ruled without any deference to the monarchy whatsoever.

One of the first orders of business of the National Convention was to try and execute Louis XVI for treason. The trial was political rather than criminal, and the King's execution was met with outrage by foreign governments as well as from Royalist sympathizers in France. The execution of the king, followed by a call for national conscription in March 1793 led to rebellion and a civil war in the Vendee, a Royalist/Catholic stronghold. The "Pacification" of the Vendee took a year, and resulted in the slaughter of over 130,000 French civilians.

The resistance of some members of the Convention to the radical measures advocated by the Jacobins resulted in a purge of the moderate "Girondist" party, and the establishment of a Committee of Public Safety to root out traitors and Royalist sympathizers. The monarchies of Europe raised new armies to march against France, and by fall of 1793 the Reign of Terror was in full swing.

During the next nine months over 40,000 citizens were executed for being "enemies of the state", about half by guillotine.



EXECUTION OF LOUIS XVI

The Thermidorian Reaction—The anarchy and lawlessness of the Reign of Terror was brought to an end when the radicals and murderers turned on each other. [Georges Danton](#) was a leading figure in the revolution, but he was accused by [Robespierre](#), (nicknamed "The Incorruptible"), of profiting through bribes and influence peddling. His execution alarmed many of his followers, especially those who had also profited by bribes or confiscation of property. They began to see Robespierre's idealist revolutionary zeal as a threat to themselves, and in July 1794 in an incident known as the Thermidorian Reaction, Robespierre and his closest allies were executed.

Robespierre had been popular among the Paris mob, and the Thermidorian conspirators thought that their best chance to avoid the same fate was to dismantle the Committee of Public Safety, free all political prisoners, and end all executions. They then took over the National Convention and set about the task of establishing a constitutional government that was carefully constructed to ensure their own hold on power. In 1795, the National Convention gave way to the Directory, a 5-man dictatorship whose hold on power was supported by a young artillery officer by the name of [Napoleon](#).

CHARACTERS – FRENCH REVOLUTION

ENLIGHTENMENT PHILOSOPHERS

Voltaire	1694–1778	Controversial "free-thinker", satirist, essayist, and philosopher of the Enlightenment.
Rousseau	1712–1778	Romantic Political Philosopher who influenced both the American and the French Revolutions.
Abbe Sieyes	1748–1836	Apostate abbot with republican leanings. Leading thinker of early years of the revolution, who was exiled during the most radical phase

REVOLUTIONARY LEADERS

Jean-Paul Marat	1743–1793	Radical Doctor who became Leader of the Reign of Terror during the French Revolution.
Toussaint L'Ouverture	1743–1803	Former slave who became the leader of rebel slaves seeking to overthrow the French government in Haiti.
Mirabeau	1749–1791	Moderate leader of the French Revolution who died before he could effect a compromise.
Duke of Orleans	1747–1793	Liberal cousin of Louis XVI who voted to execute the king, but was later beheaded by the Paris mob.
Robespierre	1758–1794	Key figure of the French Revolution. Leader of the Reign of Terror.
Georges Danton	1759–1794	Key figure of the French Revolution who was eventually lost his head.
Camille Desmoulins	1760–1794	Lawyer, journalist, and associate of Danton. Rallied the Paris mob in early days of the revolution. Leader of Cordelier club. Beheaded during the terror
Talleyrand	1754–1838	Apostate Bishop who took the lead in organizing the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. Managed to stay in favor during the French Revolution, the reign of Napoleon, and the restored monarchy by adapting his politics to suit the circumstances.

MONARCHS

Louis XVI of France	1754–1793	King of France during the French revolution. Beheaded by the mob after trying to escape from his castle.
Louis XVII of France	1785–1795	Dauphin of France, son of Marie Antoinette. Separated from his family, tortured, and murdered during reign of terror.
Maria Antoinette	1755–1793	Extravagant Queen of France. Beheaded during French Revolution.

HEROES AND MARTYRS

Madame Roland	1754–1793	Secretary of the Girondists party during the French Revolution. She was not considered republican enough by radicals and executed during the reign of terror
Lafayette	1757–1834	French soldier who fought in American Revolution, and early leader of French Revolution.
Charlotte Corday	1768–1793	Sacrificed her own life to kill the tyrant Jean-Paul Marat.
Charles Dumouriez	1739–1823	French Revolutionary General and hero of the battle of Valmy. Deserted the cause after the execution of the king and joined the royalist allies

TIMELINE – FRENCH REVOLUTION

PRE-REVOLUTIONARY PERIOD

- 1759 France loses colonies in America and India during the [Seven Year's War](#).
- 1762 [Rousseau](#) publishes "The Social Contract".
- 1774 [Louis XVI of France](#) ascends to the throne.
- 1783 French government borrows great sums to fight the English during [American Revolutionary War](#).
- 1785 "Diamond Necklace Affair" tarnishes the reputation of [Maria Antoinette](#), discredits French monarchy.

NATIONAL CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY: 1789-1791

- May 1789 Estates General convened, first time since 1614. Commoners demand that three estates sit together.
- Jul 1789 Paris mob **storms the Bastille** prison, a symbol of Royal power.
- Oct 1789 7,000 women of Paris march on Versailles to demand lower bread prices.
- Jul 1790 Church property confiscated, sold to pay national debt. Priests must take oath of allegiance.
- Apr 1791 Death of [Mirabeau](#) leaves the royals without a mediator against the radicals.
- Jun 1791 Royal family flees to Varennes—caught and forced to return to Paris.

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY: OCT 1791-SEPT 1792

- Nov 1791 All émigrés are ordered to return to France or forfeit all property.
- Apr 1792 France declares war against Austria, invades Belgium.
- Jul 1792 Austria and Prussia begin Invasion of France.
- Aug 1792 Paris commune storms Tuileries palace. [Lafayette](#) abandons Republicans, flees to Austria.
- Sep 1792 Fall of Verdun leads to panic. 1400 Royalists and religious slaughtered in **September Massacre**.
- Sep 1792 French Army, under [Charles Dumouriez](#), stops advance of Coalition troops at the **Battle of Valmy**.

NATIONAL CONVENTION: SEPT 1792-JULY 1794

- Jan 1793 Trial and execution of [Louis XVI of France](#).
- Mar 1793 National Conscription causes riots in **the Vendee**. Leads to Catholic-Royalist rebellion and civil war.
- Mar 1793 **Committee of Public Safety** is formed to protect against foreign invasion and internal rebellion.
- Jun 1793 Girondist party is purged from the National Convention, leaving the radicals in charge.
- Jul 1793 Assassination of [Jean-Paul Marat](#) by [Charlotte Corday](#), a Girondist sympathizer .
- Jul 1793 [Louis XVII of France](#), the Dauphin is imprisoned, abused and tortured to death by a vicious cobbler.
- Sep 1793 National Convention is taken over by Paris mob, demanding purges. **REIGN OF TERROR** begins
- Sep 1793 Revolutionary calendar is introduced, Sept 22, 1792 start of year 1.
- Oct 1793 [Maria Antoinette](#), Girondists, and Madame Roland guillotined. Priests and religious shot on sight.

- Nov 1793** **Cult of Reason** becomes official religion. "Goddess of Reason" is worshipped at Notre Dame.
- Dec 1793** Fall of Toulon, Royalist stronghold. [Napoleon](#) commands artillery.
- Feb 1794** Mass killings & scorched earth in the Vendee. 130,000 Catholic and Royalist supporters slaughtered.
- Apr 1794** Revolutionary leader [Georges Danton](#) arrested for corruption and executed.

THERMIDORIAN CONVENTION: JULY 1794-NOV 1795

- Jul 1794** **Thermidorian Reaction:** Danton's supporters, worrying about their own hides, execute [Robespierre](#) and his allies. They then take over the National Convention and end the Reign of Terror.
- Oct 1795** **13 Vendemiaire:** [Napoleon](#) fires on protesters in Paris, who oppose Thermidorian government.
- Nov 1795** Thermidorian Convention establishes **The Directory**, a permanent government run by them.

RECOMMENDED READING – FRENCH REVOLUTION

CORE READING ASSIGNMENTS *

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| Haaren - Famous Men of Modern Times | Robespierre (1) |
| Guerber - The Story of Modern France | The Old Monarchy to Orphans of the Temple (24) |

SUPPLEMENTAL RECOMMENDATIONS

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| Upton - The Little Dauphin | <i>entire book</i> |
| Montgomery - Stories of the French Revolution | <i>entire book</i> |
| Macgregor - The Story of France | Marie Antoinette to Marie Antoinette Is Executed (6) |
| Synge - Struggle for Sea Power | Marie Antoinette to Napoleon Bonaparte (5) |
| Birkhead - Heroes of Modern Europe | Voltaire, Spirits of the Age (1) |
| Birkhead - Story of the French Revolution | <i>entire book</i> |
| Birkhead - Marie Antoinette | <i>entire book</i> |
| Holland - Lafayette for Young Americans | Liberty for France to In the Days of Napoleon (4) |
| Morris - Historical Tales - French | The Diamond Necklace to The End of the Terror (5) |
| Abbott - Madame Roland | <i>entire book</i> |

* Most Study Questions are based on **Core Reading Assignments** .