

AP



European History

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The French Revolution



Louis XVI (r. 1774-1792)

The Old Regime

The traditional political, social, and economic system of France before 1789 was called the *Old Regime*. Under the Old Regime, the king was an absolute monarch, the clergy and nobles enjoyed many privileges, and the commoners burdened by heavy taxes were denied any political rights. And, the people were divided into three rigid, distinct classes, called *Estates*.

The First Estate

The First Estate consisted of the clergy who were considered a privileged class. The Catholic Church, with its vast income from untaxed lands and from the tithe, was determined to prevent any restrictions whatever on its privileges.

The Second Estate

The Second Estate consisted of the nobles who enjoyed great wealth and privileges. Nobles held the best and most profitable positions in the army, government, and church. In addition, they were exempt from most taxes.

The Third Estate

The Third Estate, the unprivileged citizens, who paid taxes in money, produce, and labor, consisted of the bourgeoisie (middle class), city workers, and the peasantry. Although small in numbers, the bourgeoisie was the wealthiest, most educated, and most outspoken group within the Third Estate. These lawyers, bankers, merchants, and businessmen resented the fact that they were being taxed without any sort of representation, and they were determined to remedy the situation. Peasants made up the largest group within the Third Estate. In general,

Political Cartoon

This eighteenth-century political cartoon shows a peasant bearing on his back a clergyman and a noble.



Powerful Message

The political cartoonist is making a bitter comment of the fact that peasants must pay taxes and other

French peasants were better off than peasants in other parts of Europe, but still they complained about the burden of heavy taxes, and the Corvee or forced labor they had to perform. Indeed, in the Old Regime, there were many deep-rooted abuses.

dues to support the church, the nobles, and the government, while the clergy and nobles were exempt from most taxes.

The Financial Crisis

When King Louis XIV died in 1715, France was the largest, the richest, and the most influential nation in Europe. However, the Grand Monarch left France with a heavy burden of debt incurred during his endless wars in which so many lives were lost and so much money wasted. Although France was a prosperous country, the French monarchy was approaching bankruptcy, both in its finances and in its ability to provide the nation with effective leadership. Louis XIV's successors, Louis XV and Louis XVI, proved incapable of dealing with the government's financial and administrative problems.



Louis XVI

Failure to Solve the Financial Crisis

When Louis XVI came to the throne in 1744, he saw the need for economic reform. Louis' two able finance ministers -- Turgot and Necker -- eased the financial crisis for a time by controlling government spending and reducing expenses at Versailles. However, these men had little success when they proposed taxing the nobles. Louis dismissed these minister without effecting any financial reforms. By 1788 France was in bankruptcy. To solve the financial crisis, Louis XVI called into session the Estates-General that had not met since 1614. French kings had ruled without convening the Estates-General for 175 years. By breaking this precedent Louis admitted that the king alone could not solve France's financial problems.

The Estates-General

The Undemocratic Features of the Estates-General

In 1614, the Estates-General met in three separately elected chambers representing the first estate, second estate, and third estate. Numerically, the three estates were almost equal. In addition, they voted by estate (each estate had one vote). The implications, if this precedent were followed in 1789, were obvious. The nobility and clergy would be enormously over-represented. Together they would always be able to outvote the third estate.

Doubling of the Third

There were many in France who called for a "doubling of the third" and a vote by head (each delegate would have one vote). The king authorized that the third estate be doubled, but the Parlement of Paris, dominated by nobles, opposed a vote by head. This was considered a "slap in the face" by the third estate! Now, the third estate treated the nobles with hostility and suspicion.

Representation in the Estates-General (1789)

Classes	Representatives	Votes in Estates-General	Percent of Population
Privileged Classes	First Estate	300	1%
	Second Estate	300	2%
Unprivileged Class	Third Estate	600	97%

The French Revolution: The Moderate Stage (1789-1791)

The National Assembly

When the Estates-General held its first meeting at Versailles on May 5, 1789, Louis XVI ordered the estates to meet separately and to vote by estate. The Third Estate demanded that the Estates-General be transformed into a National Assembly with each member, not each estate, having one vote. When the king rejected the proposed National Assembly, the representatives of the Third Estate, on June 17, declared themselves to be the National Assembly. This was now a revolution!



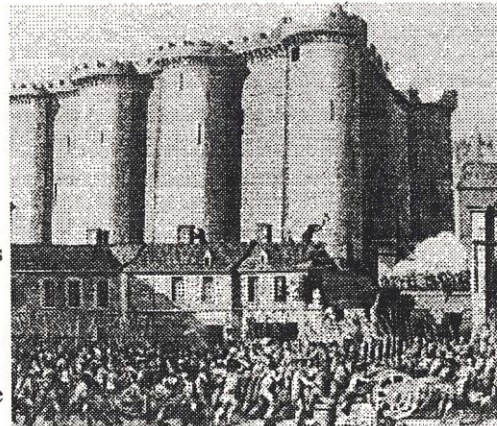
The Tennis Court Oath

Louis XVI, under pressure from the nobles, locked the members of the National Assembly out of the hall in which it met. The members assembled at an indoor tennis court nearby. There, on June 20, they swore never to disband until they had given France a constitution.

Tennis Court Oath (1789)

The Storming of the Bastille, July 14, 1789

On July 14 the event occurred that, more than any other, has symbolized the French Revolution - the storming of the Bastille. Incited by rumors that the king had ordered troops to Paris to disperse the National Assembly, a Paris mob surrounded the Bastille hoping to secure weapons and demanding the removal of some cannon the governor of the prison had placed facing outward. The crowd got out of hand, fighting began, and soon the prison was in the hands of the mob. The governor of the prison was murdered as was the mayor of Paris. Their heads were mounted on pikes and paraded through the city. When the Duke de La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt told King Louis XVI about the storming of the Bastille, the king angrily exclaimed, "This is a revolt!" "No sire," replied the duke, "it is a revolution."



Fall of the Bastille (July 14, 1789)

The Great Fear

In late July, serious unrest called the "Great Fear" broke out in rural areas. Rumors reported an impending famine and told of bandits, in the pay of the nobles, roaming the countryside attacking peasants. Driven by fear and anger, the peasants armed themselves and prepared the fight the ruthless bandits. In addition, the peasants attacked many manor houses, often hoping to destroy the records of dues and services owned the lord. News of these disorders alarmed many of the delegates in the National Assembly.

Night Session of August 4

The events in Paris and the disorder in the countryside forced the National Assembly into action. On the night of August 4, the nobles and clergy offered to end tax exemptions of the privileged classes, payment of feudal dues by

the peasants, the tithe, and all class distinctions. It would prove to be the most sweeping and radical legislative session of the whole French Revolution.

The Declaration of the Rights of Man

On August 27, 1789, the National Assembly adopted the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen*, which embodied many of the ideas of the philosophes. It declared that the authority of a government is derived from the people; that all citizens should be equal before the law; that all citizens are entitled to a voice in making the nation's laws; and that the purpose of government should be the protection of the natural rights of men to liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression. Freedom of speech, press, and religion should be guaranteed to all. The Declaration, along with the English Bill of Rights, Declaration of Independence and US Constitution, ranks as one of the great documents of modern times.

[The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen \(1789\)](#). From the Avalon Project at the Yale Law School

March of the Women to Versailles

In Paris new tensions were building. A rumor circulated that at a banquet in Versailles, newly arrived soldiers had treated the tricolor with disrespect. On October 5, an angry mob of some six or seven thousand women set off for Versailles dragging a cannon and brandishing whatever makeshift weapons they could lay their hands on. They were followed by Lafayette and 20,000 National Guardsmen. They reached Versailles in the evening and invaded the National Assembly, calling for bread and punishment of those who had insulted the national flag. Then the women marched to Versailles and gained entrance to the elegant apartment of the queen. The king finally agreed to the demands of the women and under their escort journeyed with his family to Paris. Henceforth, the king and his family would be confined to Paris, "more like prisoners than Princes."



March of the Women to Versailles

The Constitution of 1791

The National Assembly continued its efforts to draft a new constitution for France. At last, in September 1791, the constitution was complete providing for a limited monarchy.

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The Wars of Napoleon

The War of the Third Coalition (1805-1807)

As a conqueror, Napoleon achieved his greatest military successes in the years 1805 to 1807, defeating Austria, Prussia, and Russia. In 1805, France was at war against Great Britain. Austria and Russia, fearful of French power, joined the war against France, creating the Third Coalition. Prussia remained neutral at the outset of the war.

British Naval Victory at Trafalgar (1805)

In 1805, Napoleon prepared a fleet to invade Great Britain. However, on October 21, Lord Nelson's fleet found the combined French and Spanish fleets at Cape Trafalgar, near Spain. British superiority in tactics and Nelson's daring leadership eliminated French naval power for the balance of the war, and Napoleon had to suspend his plans to invade Great Britain. Lord Nelson lost his life and France lost its navy. The victory at Trafalgar was undoubtedly the most glorious in the history of the British navy. Thereafter, Napoleon had no hope of making war on the sea.



Lord Horatio Nelson

Lord Nelson. This set of pages aims to pay tribute to one of England's greatest heroes.

Commodore Horatio Nelson. A short biography of Lord Nelson with related links.

French Victories on Land:

Battle of Austerlitz (1805)

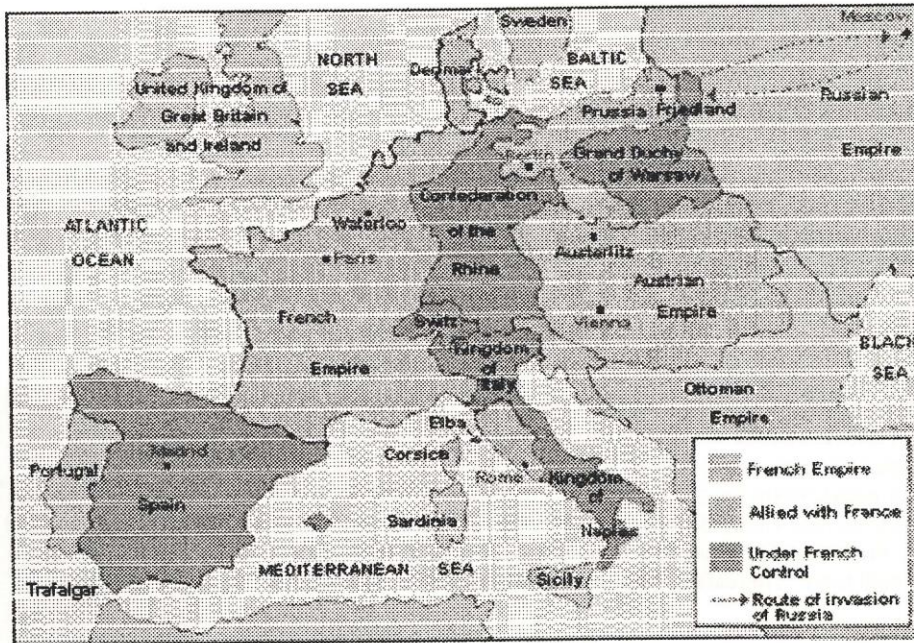
On land, however, Napoleon won many important victories. In 1805, he defeated a combined Austrian and Russian army at Austerlitz, north of Vienna. Austria signed a humiliating treaty, giving France control of most of Austria's possessions in Italy, including Venice.

Battle of Jena (1806)

In 1806, Napoleon organized a number of German states into the Confederation of the Rhine, which included almost every German state except Austria and Prussia. Napoleon's actions in Germany brought Prussia into the war against France. However, Napoleon defeated the Prussians at Jena and two weeks later, Napoleon was in Berlin.

Battle of Friedland (1807)

During the Spring of 1807, Napoleon defeated the Russians at Friedland and went on to occupy East Prussia. The Emperor then met with Tsar Alexander I of Russia and King Frederick William III of Prussia. The rulers agreed to end the War of the Third Coalition. Now, only Great Britain was at war with France.



Napoleonic Empire in 1812

The Continental System

Napoleon defeated the major powers on the continent. However, he was unable to defeat the British militarily. Unable to invade the British Isles, Napoleon decided to establish the Continental System in an effort to destroy the British economy. He ordered all European nations to stop trading with Britain. All European ports were closed to British ships and goods. However, the Continental System proved to be impossible to enforce. Two "leaks" developed in Napoleon's Continental System. One was Portugal and Spain who refused to support the Continental System. The other leak was Russia who resumed trade with Britain after 1810.

The Peninsular War (1808-1814)

The Continental System soon brought Napoleon back to the battlefield, for he had to fight a series of wars to enforce it. Spain and Portugal occupy the Iberian Peninsula in southwest Europe, and both nations refused to support the Continental System. Thereupon, Napoleon attempted to close this serious gap in the system by sending an army into Portugal and Spain. He was determined to bring Portugal and Spain into the Continental System. In 1808, Napoleon deposed the king of Spain and put his own brother Joseph on the Spanish throne. However, two factors led to the failure of this *Peninsular War*; the presence of British forces in Portugal, and the determined resistance of the Spanish people. Indeed, the Spanish rebelled against French rule and, by guerilla warfare, created a serious drain on France's military resources and served to encourage Napoleon's enemies elsewhere in Europe. (NOTE: The Peninsular War was, perhaps, Napoleon's Vietnam!)



The Third of May, 1808

The Spanish artist Francisco Goya shows French soldiers executing Spanish patriots who opposed Napoleon's occupation of Spain.

The Invasion of Russia (1812)

When Tsar Alexander resumed trade with the British, Napoleon decided to invade Russia to enforce the Continental System. He assembled an army of some 600,000 men, and in June 1812, he led this army into Russia. Napoleon planned to defeat the Russians in a quick, decisive battle. To his surprise, the Russian response was to retreat and avoid a decisive battle. In addition, the Russian used a *scorched earth* policy, burning their crops and homes as they went. Then, after a costly victory at *Borodino*, Napoleon was able to enter Moscow. However, he found the city deserted and on fire. The fire caused such extensive damage as to make it unfit for winter quarters. Thus, lacking shelter, food, and clothing to survive the oncoming winter, Napoleon began a long retreat.



Napoleon's Retreat From Russia

A Military Disaster in Russia

Napoleon's retreat became a rout as his forces were harassed by Russian attacks and by the bitter cold of the Russian winter. Napoleon lost three-fourths of his Grand Army. It is estimated that only as many as 100,000 lived to tell the tale of their terrible ordeal.

The Fall of Napoleon

The disastrous invasion of Russia in 1812 marked the beginning of his fall. In 1813, the Russians, Prussians, and Austrians joined in the last and most powerful coalition against Napoleon. They defeated Napoleon at Leipzig, in central Germany, at the Battle of Nations. In 1814, Napoleon abdicated and was exiled to the island of Elba, located off the west coast of Italy. In March 1815, he escaped from Elba and returned to power for the period of the Hundred Days. Defeated at Waterloo in June 1815, Napoleon was again exiled, this time to the South Atlantic island of St. Helena where he died in 1821.

Links Updated November 1999

[Napoleon Bonaparte Internet Guide](#). This page to make it easier for you to find things concerning Napoleon and the Napoleonic Era.

[Napoleon Bonaparte](#). A fine source of information Napoleon. Nice graphics and music.

http://www.eurohist.com/the_napoleonic_era.htm

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