

Feudalism and Unfair Taxation

No one factor was directly responsible for the French Revolution. Years of feudal oppression and fiscal mismanagement contributed to a French society that was ripe for revolt. Noting a downward economic spiral in the late 1700s, King **Louis XVI** brought in a number of financial advisors to review the weakened French treasury. Each advisor reached the same conclusion—that France needed a radical change in the way it taxed the public—and each advisor was, in turn, kicked out.

Finally, the king realized that this **taxation** problem really did need to be addressed, so he appointed a new controller general of finance, **Charles de Calonne**, in 1783. Calonne suggested that, among other things, France begin taxing the previously exempt **nobility**. The nobility refused, even after Calonne pleaded with them during the **Assembly of Notables** in 1787. Financial ruin thus seemed imminent.

The Estates-General

In a final act of desperation, Louis XVI decided in 1789 to convene the **Estates-General**, an ancient assembly consisting of three different **estates** that each represented a portion of the French population. If the Estates-General could agree on a tax solution, it would be implemented. However, since two of the three estates—the **clergy** and the **nobility**—were tax-exempt, the attainment of any such solution was unlikely.

Moreover, the outdated rules of order for the Estates-General gave each estate a single vote, despite the fact that the **Third Estate**—consisting of the general French public—was many times larger than either of the first two. Feuds quickly broke out over this disparity and would prove to be irreconcilable. Realizing that its numbers gave it an automatic advantage, the Third Estate declared itself the sovereign **National Assembly**. Within days of the announcement, many members of the other two estates had switched allegiances over to this revolutionary new assembly.

The Bastille and the Great Fear

Shortly after the National Assembly formed, its members took the **Tennis Court Oath**, swearing that they would not relent in their efforts until a new constitution had been agreed upon. The National Assembly's revolutionary spirit galvanized France, manifesting in a number of different ways. In Paris, citizens stormed the city's largest prison, the **Bastille**, in pursuit of arms. In the countryside, peasants and farmers revolted against their feudal contracts by attacking the manors and estates of their landlords. Dubbed the "**Great Fear**," these rural attacks continued until the early August issuing of the **August Decrees**, which freed those peasants from their oppressive contracts. Shortly thereafter, the assembly released the **Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen**, which established a proper judicial code and the autonomy of the French people.

Rifts in the Assembly

Though the National Assembly did succeed in drafting a **constitution**, the relative peace of the moment was short-lived. A rift slowly grew between the radical and moderate assembly members, while the common laborers and workers began to feel overlooked. When Louis XVI was caught in a foiled escape plot, the assembly became especially divided. The moderate **Girondins** took a stance in favor of retaining the constitutional monarchy, while the radical **Jacobins** wanted the king completely out of the picture.

Outside of France, some neighboring countries feared that France's revolutionary spirit would spread beyond French land. In response, they issued the **Declaration of Pillnitz**, which insisted that the French return Louis XVI to the throne. French leaders interpreted the declaration as hostile, so the Girondin-led assembly declared war on Austria and Prussia.

The Reign of Terror

The first acts of the newly named **National Convention** were the abolition of the monarchy and the declaration of France as a **republic**. In January 1793, the convention tried and **executed** Louis XVI on the grounds of treason. Despite the creation of the **Committee of Public Safety**, the war with Austria and Prussia went poorly for France, and foreign forces pressed on into French territory. Enraged citizens overthrew the Girondin-led National Convention, and the Jacobins, led by **Maximilien Robespierre**, took control.

Backed by the newly approved **Constitution of 1793**, Robespierre and the Committee of Public Safety began conscripting French soldiers and implementing laws to stabilize the economy. For a time, it seemed that France's fortunes might be changing. But Robespierre, growing increasingly paranoid about counterrevolutionary influences, embarked upon a **Reign of Terror** in late 1793–1794, during which he had more than 15,000 people executed at the guillotine. When the French army successfully removed foreign invaders and the economy finally stabilized, however, Robespierre no longer had any justification for his extreme actions, and he himself was arrested in July 1794 and executed.

The Thermidorian Reaction and the Directory

The era following the ousting of Robespierre was known as the **Thermidorian Reaction**, and a period of governmental restructuring began, leading to the new **Constitution of 1795** and a significantly more conservative National Convention. To control executive responsibilities and appointments, a group known as the **Directory** was formed. Though it had no legislative abilities, the Directory's abuse of power soon came to rival that of any of the tyrannous revolutionaries France had faced.

Napoleon

Meanwhile, the Committee of Public Safety's war effort was realizing unimaginable success. French armies, especially those led by young general **Napoleon Bonaparte**, were making progress in nearly every direction. Napoleon's forces drove through Italy and reached as far as Egypt before facing a deflating defeat. In the face of this rout, and having received word of political upheavals in France, Napoleon returned to Paris. He arrived in time to lead a **coup** against the Directory in 1799, eventually stepping up and naming himself "first consul"—effectively, the leader of France. With Napoleon at the helm, the Revolution ended, and France entered a fifteen-year period of military rule.