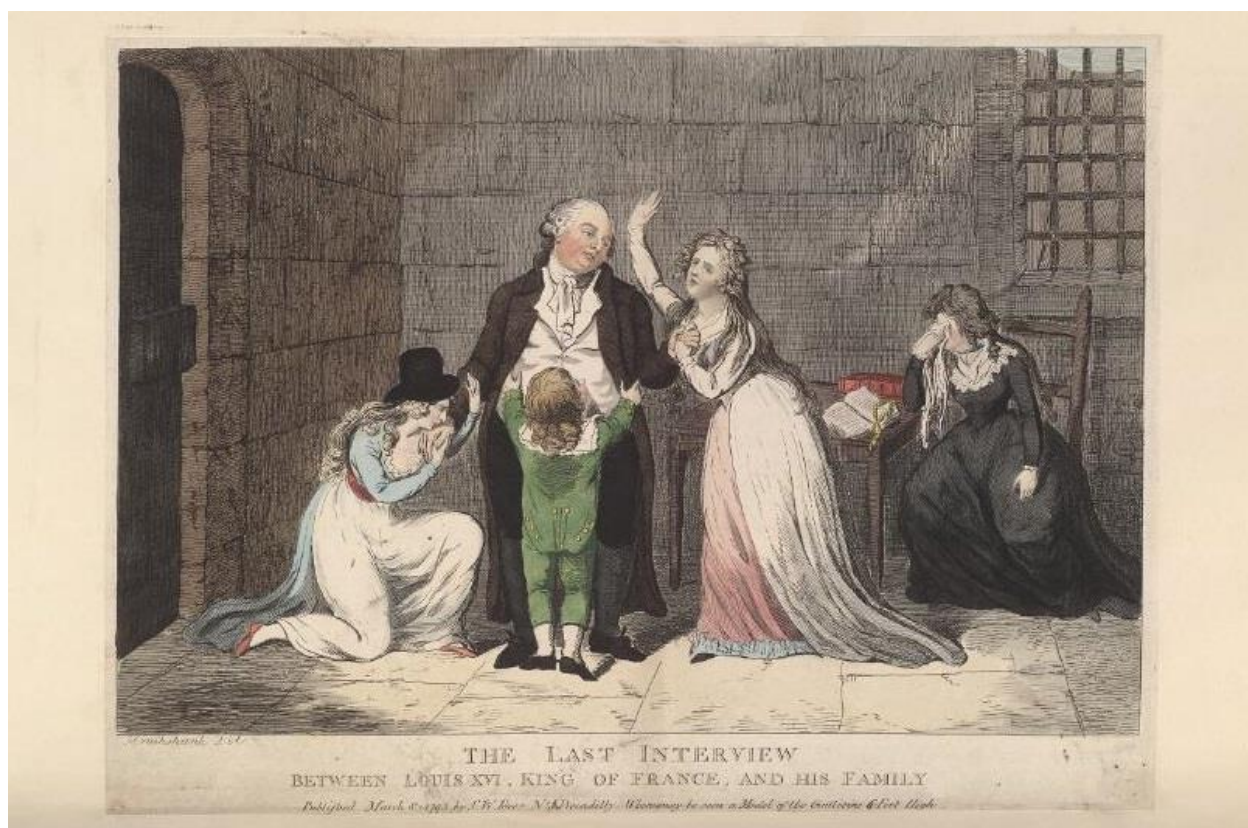


# The French Revolution



*[Image Source: Wikimedia Commons](#)*

## The French Revolution

This AP European History Crash Course will prepare you for questions about the French Revolution on your upcoming AP European History Exam. Though the French Revolution itself lasted only about a decade, its influence on European politics, culture, economics, and thought is hard to measure. You will encounter questions about the French Revolution on your AP Euro Exam, so let's get started on the review!

# The French Revolution Cont.

## Origins of the French Revolution: Why did it Happen?

The French Revolution began in July of 1789. Though its roots were political, the Revolution incited economic, religious, and social change that permanently altered France and sent shock waves through Europe.

Every AP European History student must remember that pre-Revolutionary France was divided into three estates: the clergy, the nobility, and the third estate, which included everyone else in the land, from the urban poor and rural peasants to the on-the-rise upper-middle-class bourgeois. The first and second estate, combined, represented only two percent of the population of France. The third estate, though representing the other 98 percent had little to no representation in government.

Traditionally, when French Kings needed money or support, they allowed meetings of the Estates-General. Here, the three estates would be represented, but since each was given only one vote, the first and second joined, and the demands of the third estate were defeated.

France's many wars had emptied the treasury. Significant drought, poor agricultural and cattle yields, and rapidly inflating food prices (especially regarding the price of bread), brought the situation in France to a crisis.

## The French Revolution Begins

Two key crisis events took place in the summer of 1789:

- On July 14, 1789, Paris revolutionaries stormed the Bastille, a fortress that contained only about seven prisoners at the time, yet represented the oppression of absolutism, since these were prisoners held without a trial. The revolution was marked by violence at the outset, as the successful revolutionaries paraded through the streets with the murdered prison governor's head on a pike.

## The French Revolution Cont.

- Meanwhile in the countryside, a peasant revolt had begun. The revolt was the result of rumors that the King was preparing to use his army to slaughter the peasants en masse or starve them to death, in order to reestablish his authority and put an end to unrest. Known as the Great Fear, the revolt dominated July and August of 1789, and was only quelled when feudal contracts were invalidated by the National Assembly.
- Desperate for support, King Louis XVI begrudgingly called for a meeting of the Estates-General and asked for each of the estates to arrive with proposals (Cahiers) that explained their complaints against the government. Though Louis did this in hopes of strengthening his rule and securing the tax revenue he needed to pay the bills, what happened next would lead to the end of his rule and change history.

### France's Constitutional Monarchy

When Louis XVI became nervous about the meetings, he attempted to lock the third estate out of their meeting place. Unwilling simply to return home, the representatives of the third estate moved their meeting place to a local tennis court and vowed not to leave until they had written a constitution for France. The promise the National Assembly, as they now called themselves made with each other is known as The Tennis Court Oath.

*Tip: You should note that at this point, the leaders of the third estate were largely upper-middle-class lawyers, and the new constitution was their product and did not involve the urban poor or peasants. Their direct role in the Revolution would come later, as we will explore below.*

On August 4th, 1789, the National Assembly adopted the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, which recognized the rights of life, liberty, and property and called for the King to recognize the sovereignty of the people.

In October, the poor women of Paris march on the King's palace in what is known as the Bread Riots. They demand a fair price for bread, a staple of the diet of poor.

## The French Revolution Cont.

It doesn't end here! Keep reading to find out how, only two years later, Louis XVI and his wife, Marie Antoinette would be executed by guillotine in Paris.

### The Beginning of the End of Louis XVI

As the National Assembly continued to draft a new constitution, competing factions began to develop:

- Royalists were those who supported Louis XVI's right to absolute rule. Many royalists began to leave the country as they saw their political fortunes coming to an end and began to fear for their lives.
- Girondists were at first the majority group. They called for a new Constitution and were revolutionaries in the sense of calling for change, but came to be viewed as moderates as the revolution radicalized.
- Jacobins were a more radical group. They allied themselves with a new power base —the sans-culottes. The sans-culottes, literally, those who could not afford the fashionable breeches of the day and were “without pants”, were the poor working class of Paris. The Jacobins became the new majority as the revolution radicalized. The most radical members of this group became known as The Mountain.

Louis XVI could see the writing on the wall, and attempted to flee France with his family in June of 1791, but they were caught and returned to Paris. Left with little choice Louis agreed to sign the new Constitution and in September of 1791, France became a Constitutional Monarchy.

The story doesn't end here! Unlike in Britain, where the emergence of a Constitutional Monarchy allowed the country to develop largely free of bloody revolution, in August of 1792 French history took a violent, bloody turn. Months of rioting and mass executions of accused counterrevolutionaries resulted in the replacement of the National Assembly with the more radical National Convention.

## The French Revolution Cont.

During this period, French culture underwent a radical change in the name of patriotism and revolution. Citizens, as people now referred to one another, were to wear the tricolor (a red, white, and blue pin, for example) to show their support of the Revolution. France rejected old ways and instituted a new French calendar, a system of measurement (the Metric system), new holidays, and new styles of clothing. The Revolution began to persecute Catholics, and to close churches throughout Paris as they established a new Cult of Reason worshiping the goddess of reason. Though in many ways, France was uniting in a new, secular culture, there were deep political divisions. Read on to understand the political rivalries that divided Revolutionary France!

### **The Debate Over “Equality”**

By this time, the Revolution was divided. The Girondists called for Equality of Opportunity. They believed that France should recognize the equal rights of all, but that free markets and freedom were the promise of what should become new, Republican France.

The Jacobins, to keep the support of the sans-culottes, promised equality in an economic sense. They called for the regulation of prices and wages, promised bread to all, and advocated seizing of property and its distribution amongst the poor. The extreme Jacobins now had control of Paris. Led by Robespierre, they captured King Louis XVI and his wife, Marie-Antoinette, sentencing them both to death by guillotine.

### **France as a Republic**

After the death of King Louis XVI, the new French state went to war with various European powers, including Britain, due to longstanding political and historical grievances and Austria due to the accusation by some radical French legislators that counterrevolutionaries were assembling in Austria and preparing to mount an offensive in France.

## The French Revolution Cont.

In June 1793, the Girondists were defeated, and the Jacobins took control. That marked the beginning of the most violent, bloody phase of the French Revolution, known as the Reign of Terror. It was a 10-month span of time wherein thousands were executed on the order of Jacobin leader Maximilien de Robespierre and his Committee of Public Safety.

There was a constant struggle for power within the Committee. Shifting loyalties and regular purges meant that no one was safe from accusations of secretly plotting against the Revolution. In September of 1794, Robespierre himself was executed by the guillotine, effectively ending the Reign Of Terror he had instituted.

What happened next, you ask? Exhausted by blood, on August 22nd, 1795, what was left of the National Convention adopted a new constitution. It created what was known as the Directory, a five-person executive committee. The Directory ruled in a less bloody fashion but was marked by corruption and instability.

The Directory's rule ended on November 9th, 1799, when Napoleon Bonaparte staged a coup d'etat, installing himself as France's leader. This event marks the end of the French Revolution and the beginning of the Napoleonic Era, marked by France's renewed prevalence across the European continent.

### **The French Revolution on the AP European History Exams**

A new AP European History Exam was administered for the first time in 2016. Though the format differs from the previous exam, if you are looking for an AP European History Crash Course you should remember that you will still need to know about the key elements of the French Revolution we discussed in this article. For example, In 2015, students were asked to analyze the ways in which Napoleon Bonaparte both supported and undermined the goals of the [French Revolution during his rule of France](#)." For you to answer this well, you will require knowledge of the goals of Revolution we discussed above.

# The French Revolution Cont.

## The French Revolution – The Bottom Line

While you are working on your AP Euro Review, be sure to spend a significant amount of time on the French Revolution. Remember, history is a story, not a collection of isolated facts! The information in this article can help you to understand the end of French Absolutism and lay a firm foundation for the study of modern Europe, all of which are important to know for the AP European History Exam.

To check your understanding: Can you recount how France moved from an Absolute Monarchy to a Constitutional Monarchy, a Republic, and finally to autocratic rule by Napoleon regarding the French Revolution?