

The Revolution in Politics, 1775–1815



I. Liberty and Equality

A. Revolutionary Goals

1. Revolutions came in the wake of Enlightenment ideas.
2. The Judeo-Christian tradition of individualism supported the liberalism of the Enlightenment.
3. Liberalism was attractive to both the aristocracy and the middle class.
4. Liberty meant human rights and freedoms and the sovereignty of the people.
5. Equality meant equal rights under the law and equality of opportunity, rather than economic equality.

II. The American Revolutionary Era, 1775-1789

A. The Origins of the Revolution

1. Conflict between British government and the American colonies escalated after the mid-eighteenth century.
2. The American colonists believed they had the right to make their own laws.
3. The conflict over increased taxation following the Seven Years' War increased the discontent of the colonists.
4. The British wanted the Americans to pay their share of imperial expenses.
5. Americans actually paid very low taxes.
6. Parliament passed the Stamp Act to raise revenue.
7. Colonial protests forced the ultimate repeal of the Stamp Act.
8. Conflict broadened to include questions about control over colonial legislatures, representation, and the right to legislate.
9. The British refused to compromise and lost the support of many colonists.

B. Independence

1. Revolutionary fervor moved the crisis from debate to open hostilities.
 2. Armed conflict erupted in April 1775.
 3. The Continental Congress signed the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776.
 4. Assistance from France contributed to the eventual American victory.
 5. After eight years of fighting, Britain recognized the independence of the thirteen colonies (1783).
- C. Framing the Constitution
1. The United States was formed and defined by its Constitution (1787).
 2. Under a federal system the central government was given important powers such as the right to tax and to regulate trade.
 3. Representative self-government reflected the colonists' antagonism to British authority.
 4. A system of checks and balances was designed to balance governmental powers.
- D. The Revolution's Impact on Europe
1. The American Revolution strongly influenced Europe and especially France.
 2. Europeans were deeply interested in the political lessons of the American Revolution.
- III. The French Revolution, 1789-1791
- A. The Breakdown of the Old Order
1. Many French soldiers served in America during the American Revolution and were inspired by it.
 2. After the Seven Years' War and the American War of Independence the French government was nearly bankrupt.
 3. King Louis XVI was unwilling or unable to cancel government debt.
 4. He would have to reform the tax-collection system and raise taxes. This precipitated the revolutionary crisis.
- B. Legal Orders and Social Realities: Origins of the French Revolution
1. For two generations before the 1970s most historians saw the Revolution's origins in growing tension between bourgeoisie and nobility.
 2. Recently many "revisionists" have challenged this view with the following arguments.
 - a. The nobility remained an open order. It was possible to buy entrance.
 - b. Many nobles endorsed liberal views.
 - c. The nobility and the bourgeoisie had similar interests and pursued similar goals in the economic sphere.
 3. French society was still legally organized according to the medieval system of "three orders," but in reality France was a country where elite status was based on wealth and education, not the medieval caste system.
- C. The Formation of the National Assembly
1. To make tax reforms, Louis XVI was forced to call the Estates General into session for the first time since 1614 (May 1789).

2. After intense debate over voting procedure, the Third Estate left the meeting of the Estates General and declared itself the National Assembly (June 1789).
- D. The Revolt of the Poor and Oppressed
1. In Paris common people who were hungry and facing unemployment due to harvest failure organized to prevent dismissal of the king's finance minister.
 2. On July 13, 1789, an angry crowd stormed the Bastille and seized weapons stored there.
 3. Peasant uprisings in the countryside led the National Assembly to abolish feudal dues and other peasant obligations to the nobility (August 1789).
- E. A Limited Monarchy
1. Also in August 1789, the National Assembly issued a Declaration of the Rights of Man, stating "Men are born and remain free and equal in rights."
 2. The National Assembly created a constitutional monarchy with the reluctant consent of King Louis XVI. A new constitution went into effect in 1791.
 3. Peasants reacted negatively to the National Assembly's attempt to increase state control over the Catholic Church.
- IV. World War and Republican France, 1791-1799
- A. Foreign Reactions and the Beginning of War
1. Edmund Burke published the classic critique of the French Revolution, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, in 1790.
 2. Mary Wollstonecraft published her rebuttal, *A Vindication of the Rights of Man* in the same year.
 3. Wollstonecraft and the Frenchwoman Olympe de Gouges argued that women should be included in the liberal ideal of equality.
 4. In the summer and fall of 1791 the Revolution was radicalized by several events.
 - a. Louis XVI's attempt to escape France
 - b. Austria and Prussia's declaration of readiness to intervene in France under certain conditions
 - c. The election of a new Legislative Assembly under a new constitution
 5. By the summer of 1792 France was at war with Austria and Prussia and the Legislative Assembly had removed Louis XVI from the throne.
- B. The Second Revolution
1. Members of the newly elected National Convention declared France a Republic in September 1792.
 2. Revolutionaries tried to create a new revolutionary French culture.
 3. The Convention tried and executed Louis XVI on charges of treason.
 4. The sans culottes, or working people of Paris, exercised a strong influence on the Convention.
- C. Total War and the Terror
1. Military defeats prompted the revolutionary government, led by the Committee of Public Safety, to establish a primitive sort of centrally

- controlled economy, with fixed prices for bread, rationing, tight control of munitions industry, and other controls.
 - 2. The Terror aimed to crush all opponents of the Revolution. About 40,000 French were executed in the Terror and 300,000 suspects were arrested.
 - 3. France mobilized a huge number (800,000) of motivated soldiers by instituting a draft and encouraging patriotic sentiment.
 - 4. Outnumbering their opponents by perhaps 4 to 1, France won great battlefield victories.
- D. The Thermidorian Reaction and the Directory, 1794-1799
- 1. The Convention, fearing the expansion of the Terror, executed Maximilien Robespierre in July 1794.
 - 2. A new executive, the five-man directory, ruled France from 1795-1799, essentially as dictators.
 - 3. The end of economic controls hit the poor in Paris hard, and resulted in riots that were suppressed by force.
 - 4. In rural France villagers, especially women, restored a normal, structured lifestyle, based in part on the Catholic Church.
- V. The Napoleonic Era, 1799-1815
- A. Napoleon's Rule of France
- 1. Napoleon confirmed the gains of the peasantry and reassured the middle class by defending property.
 - 2. He strengthened the central bureaucracy of France.
 - 3. By the Concordat of 1801 he simultaneously reinstated freedom of worship for Catholics and maintained tight control of the Church.
 - 4. Napoleon's new law code reduced women's legal and property rights.
 - 5. Napoleon established a police state and strict censorship to silence political dissent.
- B. Napoleon's Wars and Foreign Policy
- 1. The Treaty of Amiens with Great Britain (1802) gave France Holland, the Austrian Netherlands, the west bank of the Rhine, and most of the Italian peninsula.
 - 2. In May 1803 Napoleon renewed war with Britain, but his plans to invade the island were shattered by the naval battle of Trafalgar (1805).
 - 3. Austria, Russia, and Sweden joined Britain in the Third Coalition against Napoleon (1805). Napoleon defeated the Coalition's continental partners.
 - 4. In 1806 Napoleon crushed Prussia.
 - 5. French occupation of much of Europe eventually produced nationalist reactions, as the conquered areas attempted to throw off French rule.
 - 6. In June 1812 Napoleon invaded Russia. He was defeated.
 - 7. Joined by Austria and Prussia, Russia and Great Britain defeated Napoleon in 1814.
 - 8. The victorious allies set up a constitutional monarchy in France under Louis XVIII.