



# Causes of the French Revolution

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**Abstract:** The French Revolution remains an enduring legend in history, captivating scholars and evoking both sympathy and resentment. This paper explores the multifaceted nature of the revolution, considering its significance as both a conflict of arms and a clash of ideas. The ideals of freedom, equality, and fraternity emerged as the revolution's timeless contributions, shaping subsequent events in nineteenth-century Europe. Examining the causes that precipitated the revolution, we delve into the political and social dynamics of the time. The absolute monarchy, characterized by a despotic king and a corrupt administration, laid the groundwork for discontent. The complex social structure, with stark divisions among the clergy, nobility, bourgeoisie, and peasants, further fuelled grievances. The paper analyses the role of each social class and their motivations for seeking change. Furthermore, it investigates the influence of key figures, such as Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, as well as the rising bourgeoisie, whose economic power clashed with their limited political rights [1]. The impact of the Church and its declining popularity is also explored, shedding light on the religious and societal dynamics of the time. Ultimately, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the French Revolution, its causes, and its far-reaching consequences, asserting that Napoleon can be seen as a product of the revolution's tumultuous journey.

## I. Introduction

The French Revolution stands as a testament to both the clash of ideologies and the use of force. Its enduring legacy lies in the principles of Freedom, Equality, and Fraternity, while Napoleon can be seen as a direct product of this transformative era. The French Revolution transcends the boundaries of a mere historical event; it embodies a living legend. Few subjects have been scrutinized with such comprehensive detail throughout history, evoking intense sympathy and resentment unlike any other event in the world. This revolution, with its profound impact, influenced the course of European history in the nineteenth century, leaving an indelible mark on subsequent events. The

collapse of the archaic political system was an inevitable consequence of the French Revolution. The period from 1789 to 1815 can be encapsulated in four words: revolution, war, tyranny, and empire. The initial revolution, tainted by violence and brutality, led to protracted wars. Subsequently, the military despotism of Napoleon gave rise to his imperial ambitions, culminating in the establishment of a vast empire. The French Revolution is commonly associated with its commencement in 1789, while some scholars attribute its onset to the convening of the Estates General on May 5, 1789, and others point to the conquest of the Bastille fortress on July 14, 1789. However, numerous events preceding 1789, occurring between 1787 and 1799, can be traced back to various causes that fuelled the revolution's inception and expansion. The roots of the revolution can be found within the antiquated system of the ancient regime, and a closer examination of this system elucidates how France reached the precipice of revolution.

i. **Bourbon Dynasty:** The Bourbon Dynasty exerted its rule over France from 1589 to 1793 and again from 1814 to 1830, establishing an absolute monarchy that experienced its pinnacle under the reign of Louis XIV but ultimately met its downfall during the era of Louis XVI. Subsequently, Louis XVIII and Charles X assumed the role of constitutional monarchs. The House of Bourbon, a European dynasty of French descent, emerged as a branch of the Capetian dynasty and became the royal house of France. Initially, Bourbon kings held authority over France and Navarre in the 16th century, but their influence expanded to include thrones in Spain, Naples, Sicily, and Parma by the 18th century [2]. At present, Spain and Luxembourg boast monarchs from the House of Bourbon. The senior lineage of the Bourbon dynasty ceased to exist in the male line with the passing of Charles III, Duke of Bourbon, in 1527. Consequently, the junior Bourbon-Vendome branch assumed precedence as the genealogically senior branch within the House of Bourbon. In 1589, with the demise of Henry III of France, the House of Valois experienced extinction



in the male line, solidifying the Bourbon's position as the reigning power.

## II. Causes of the French Revolution

i. **Political Set-up:** During the period leading up to the French Revolution, France was ruled by an absolute monarchy under King Louis XVI, who wielded unchecked power and believed his decisions were law. The only institution with some ability to restrain the king was the Parliament, which registered the king's orders as laws but could refuse to do so. However, the Parliament was primarily composed of judges who had purchased noble titles, and its influence was limited. Louis XV, the predecessor of Louis XVI, was an ineffective ruler who neglected administrative matters in favour of a luxurious lifestyle. The conditions were desperate, and Louis XVI lacked leadership qualities and disregarded the advice of others. He remained under the influence of his wife, Marie Antoinette, who was deemed incompetent and extravagant. Various factors contributed to the climate that led to the French Revolution, including betrayal by friends and courtiers, religious intolerance, misbehaviour towards priests, rumors, unruly crowds incited by troublemakers, political defections, opposition from vested interests, economic bankruptcy, social inequality, and the lack of effective governance in the provinces. The administrative work was centralized in Versailles, with limited local self-government, leading to detached and inexperienced public servants. Overall, these circumstances set the stage for the tumultuous events of the French Revolution [4].

ii. **Social Set-up:** French society before the Revolution was characterized by feudalism, inequality, and division among three main classes: clergy, nobility, and commoners. The clergy and nobility held special privileges and power, while the majority of the population, the bourgeoisie and peasants, lacked such advantages. The elite, comprising just one percent of the population, possessed wealth, rights, and a luxurious lifestyle, while the remaining 99% faced burdensome taxes and limited opportunities. The lack of social mobility and resentment over special rights contributed to the brewing dissatisfaction among the masses. The bourgeoisie, comprising about 10% of the population and consisting of bankers, entrepreneurs, and merchants, played a crucial role in the nation's economic growth but lacked political influence. Privileges reserved for the aristocracy and clergy fuelled discontent, as the bourgeoisie sought

equality and shared political rights. The drive for centralization and the need for funds to support wars further exacerbated tensions, leading to calls for change and reform.

## III. Economic Set-up of The French Revolution

The economic situation in pre-revolutionary France was dire due to the extravagance of the ruling classes and a flawed taxation system. The government's financial policy was misguided, as the personal income of the king was not separated from the state's income, allowing for lavish lifestyles without restraint. Costly further depleted the country's economy. King Louis XV's involvement in conflicts such as the Austrian War of Succession and the Seven Years' War worsened the economic condition. France suffered an annual loss of two million dollars, resulting in heavy borrowing at high interest rates, with half of the national revenue going towards interest payments. The taxation system was disorganized and unjust, with special exemptions granted to the nobility, while the common people faced numerous burdensome taxes. Tax collection procedures were flawed, with contractors misappropriating funds, and rates varying between provinces [5]. The government's commercial policy hindered trade and economic growth. These economic grievances, along with other factors, eventually sparked the French Revolution [3].

## IV. Intellectual Enlightenment of The French Revolution

In the 18th century, France experienced a significant intellectual shift as prominent thinkers such as Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot, Quesnay, Tourge, and D'alembert embraced the enlightened outlook and promoted independent thinking. These philosophers aimed to create a progressive and ideal society by advocating for laissez-faire, fair taxation, and autonomous administration. Through their thought-provoking writings, they exposed the inequalities, exploitation, religious intolerance, and corruption prevailing in French institutions. They effectively stirred discontent among the population, even though France lacked a parliamentary system. The Enlightenment also emphasized a scientific approach to life and placed a greater focus on the welfare of the public. The extent to which the intellectual movement influenced the French Revolution is a controversial topic. While some credit the philosophers for inspiring the revolution,



others argue that the revolution was more influenced by the overall revolutionary environment of the time or external factors like the success of the American Revolution and the idea of freedom. During this era, Montesquieu proposed the division of power within the government, Rousseau emphasized the social contract between people and their representatives, and he also discussed the detrimental effects of civilization on human nature. The French Revolution later gave rise to the Directory, a governing body that faced challenges due to economic hardship, corruption, and moral decay. Ultimately, the Directory was overthrown, paving the way for the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte, who initiated a new era known as the Napoleonic Era. Napoleon's extraordinary abilities and ambition enabled him to become a revered conqueror and ruler, albeit with some negative traits. The causes of Napoleon's ascent can be attributed to the disillusionment with the Revolution, economic hardships, the shortcomings of the Directory, and the desire for stability among the bourgeoisie. Napoleon's success in military campaigns, his reputation as a competent ruler, and his ability to bring order and glory to France further solidified his position.

#### **V. The Reign of Terror (5 September 1793 – 27 July 1794)**

The period following the dissolution of the Legislative Assembly in the French Revolution witnessed the emergence of the National Convention, a diverse assembly consisting of both Girondists and Jacobins. The Girondists, led by figures such as Brissot, Condorcet [2] and Thomas Penn, advocated for a democratic Republic, challenging the dominance of Paris and proposing a decentralized government. However, their idealistic approach and inability to effectively navigate the political landscape led to conflicts with the Jacobins, who held control over the Commune of Paris and wielded significant influence within the Convention. This internal strife, combined with external threats and the challenges of drafting a constitution, hindered the progress of the National Convention. Ultimately, the Girondists were overthrown by the Jacobins, marking a significant turning point in the Revolution and paving the way for the Reign of Terror.

#### **VI. Campaign of the French Revolution**

The passage describes three significant campaigns during the French Revolution:

(i) Italian Campaign: Napoleon, at that time an unknown young commander, led French troops in

Italy. Despite initial scepticism from his senior officers, Napoleon issued a bulletin to boost morale and inspire his poorly equipped army. With a force of 49,300 soldiers, he faced scattered Austrian forces commanded by the elderly Boulio. Napoleon's victories at Dougy and Sardinia forced Sardinia to sign a peace pact, conceding Savoy and Nice to France. He then focused on Austria, crossing the Lodi Bridge and entering Milan. Napoleon established the Transpadane Republic and merged other states with it. The campaign resulted in territorial gains for France and enhanced Napoleon's reputation.

(ii) Egyptian Campaign: Napoleon recognized England as a formidable enemy and sought to harm its colonial empire. He proposed an attack on Egypt to weaken England's colonial foundation. Departing with 38,000 soldiers and 400 ships, Napoleon encountered the British fleet but escaped unharmed due to a hurricane. He took Malta and arrived in Alexandria. After defeating the Egyptians at the Battle of the Pyramids, his fleet was destroyed in the Battle of the Nile by the British. Stranded in Egypt, Napoleon endured harsh conditions but engaged in scientific and archaeological research. The Turkish declaration of war and other setbacks forced his return to France, leaving behind a failed campaign but contributing to the study of Egyptian civilization [2].

(iii) Napoleon assumes Absolute Power: The rule of the Directory in France was marked by corruption, anarchy, and public disillusionment. When Napoleon returned to Paris from Egypt, he gained popularity while the government lost public faith. The deteriorating foreign policy and internal affairs presented an opportunity for Napoleon to take decisive action. Through political maneuvering and conspiracies, he orchestrated the resignation of the five executives of the Directory and the formation of a committee. On 18 Brumaire (November 9, 1799), Napoleon staged a coup and dissolved the Directory, effectively seizing power. This event marked the end of the French Revolution and the beginning of Napoleon's rise to power as the First Consul and, later, Emperor of the French.

#### **VII. The Impact of the French Revolution**

The French Revolution had a profound impact not only on France but also on Europe and the world at large, leaving an indelible imprint. The revolutionary ideals of liberty, equality, fraternity, and democracy sparked a political awakening across Europe, inciting people to rise and demand their rights [2]. The Revolution's influence within France was far-reaching, addressing deep-rooted



deformities and faults of the old system [3]. It dismantled the autocratic and despotic rule of the Bourbon dynasty, leading to the establishment of a democratic order. Socially, the Revolution brought an end to the privileged class, abolished feudalism, and improved the conditions of the middle and lower classes. The dominance of the Church was also challenged, with the revolutionaries confiscating its land and advocating for religious freedom [1]. Economically, the Revolution brought about radical changes, addressing the state's economic decay and corruption. Administrative, constitutional, and legal reforms were implemented, including the reorganization of the administrative system, establishment of a constitutional monarchy, and the introduction of a uniform legal system. The Declaration of Human Rights, a hallmark of the Revolution, underscored the importance of individual freedoms and became a touchstone for subsequent discussions on human rights [2]. However, the Revolution was not without its negative effects, as it resulted in turmoil, anarchy, and violence, particularly during the Reign of Terror. Foreign nations waged war against France, leading to prolonged conflicts that strained the French economy. Beyond France, the Revolution's impact reached Britain, initially embraced but later opposed due to fears of anarchy. It fuelled demands for parliamentary reforms in England and ignited the spirit of nationalism in Ireland. The revolution's pan-European nature inspired revolts and the quest for political rights throughout the continent, eventually leading to a reactionary age and attempts to suppress liberal ideas. Nevertheless, the French Revolution had a lasting global impact, giving birth to a new civilization and advocating for the sovereignty of the people, political and social equality, and democratic principles. It instilled a spirit of nationalism, contributing to the unification of Italy and Germany and inspiring movements for freedom in various countries [5]. The revolution also popularized the concept of democracy, challenged the supremacy of religion in politics, and championed secularism and the condemnation of religious fanaticism. In conclusion, the French Revolution was a complex and multifaceted event, characterized by distinct phases and shifting leadership, but it brought about significant changes and set the stage for transformative ideas and movements worldwide.

### **VIII. Significance of French Revolution in World History**

The French Revolution holds immense significance in world history, leaving an enduring impact on Europe and the entire globe [3].

Renowned philosopher Kant hailed it as a triumph of wisdom, while intellectuals such as Hegel commemorated it by planting trees. The fall of Bastille even ignited joyous dancing among students in St. Petersburg. The Revolution's essence, encapsulated in the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity, resonated throughout Europe and transformed French history into European history. It also provided Napoleon, France's national hero, with a golden opportunity to become the hero of Europe. Assessing the Revolution's global influence is no easy task, but it played a pivotal role in the success of Greek independence in 1830 and contributed significantly to the unification of Italy through Napoleon's involvement. Additionally, by dismantling the Holy Roman Empire, Napoleon paved the way for the eventual unification of Germany. Even England did not escape the wide-reaching effects of the French Revolution. Although the first French republic's short duration may suggest failure, it upheld the Revolution's noble objectives. Feudal privileges failed to regain their former prominence, and the Church could not revive its past glory. The government functioned effectively, improving the conditions for farmers and expanding the reach of the law. Rational taxation measures were implemented, and the Revolution introduced a new concept of the state, propagated novel ideologies in politics and society, and presented a fresh outlook on life, sparking imagination and enthusiasm among the masses. While the Revolution's objectives may have been thwarted, its ideals permeated Europe, and the principles enshrined in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen were diffused far and wide. Historians' opinions on the Revolution's significance vary, with some viewing it as an anti-democratic and unprogressive movement, while others believe it was the wellspring of modern thought. French historians assert that the Revolution laid the groundwork for liberal democracy and a progressive outlook on modern life. Some argue that it played a remarkable role in shaping the modern age in Europe, familiarizing the common people with the ideals of liberty [4], equality, and democracy, and dismantling the remnants of the old order in politics, economy, social life, diplomacy, and warfare. Undoubtedly, the French Revolution occupies a remarkable place in history, particularly European history, as it opened the world's eyes to Napoleon's achievements and the wider implications of the Revolution. Nevertheless, it is crucial to note that America had already achieved independence prior to the Revolution's outbreak, and this was of utmost importance for Europe and the world's future.



Even before 1789, both England and America had experienced a fervent wave of reformism and democratic public opinion, which contributed to significant liberal changes. The Industrial Revolution had already commenced, while progress in science and culture had set the stage for the profound transformations witnessed in the 19th century [4]. The romantic movement in literature and art had also emerged prior to the Revolution, playing a decisive role in shaping its trajectory. Although contemporary events undoubtedly influenced the Revolution's course, the intellectual undercurrents of the age would likely have blossomed even in the absence of its repercussions. The Revolution showcased not only the valiant feats of its participants, who reshaped Europe's future, but also the brilliance of individuals like Antoine Lavoisier, Adam Smith, James Watt, and Jeremy Bentham, whose intellectual contributions left an indelible mark on history. Amidst the clamour of war and the smoke of guns dissipating, the operation of timeless forces shaping human destiny becomes apparent, moulding the future of nations and their people.

### IX. Conclusion

The French Revolution, a period of profound societal and political tumult in France, transpired from 1789 until 1799, commencing with the historic storming of the Bastille and culminating in the ascendancy of Napoleon Bonaparte. This transformative epoch witnessed a multitude of changes within French society, encompassing the abolition of feudalism, the establishment of a republic, and the enactment of the pivotal Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. Concurrently, the Revolution yielded extensive social and cultural metamorphoses, such as the secularization and heightened realism in the realms of art and literature, alongside a fashion revolution that espoused newfound democratic values. While acknowledging the existence of negative aspects within the Revolution, it unequivocally constituted a watershed moment that propelled France into the realm of modernity. However, the initial impact of the Revolution's ideals beyond the borders of France remained relatively constrained, as monarchs and elites, appalled by its radicalization, fervently sought to suppress its influence, with Austria resorting to coercive measures to curtail potential sympathizers. Yet, the Revolutionary armies swiftly found a new leader in Napoleon, who would ultimately bring forth sweeping reforms across a considerable portion of Europe through forceful means. The decree that relinquished Church assets to the nation

represented a momentous act, fraught with far-reaching implications. As underscored by Barere's proclamation in *Le Point du jour*, the Assembly had solidified its position as a tribunal, serving as the ultimate arbiter to judge and eradicate superfluous or detrimental societal institutions, while simultaneously erecting those indispensable for the collective welfare. The political struggles of the summer of 1789 decisively determined the figurehead entrusted with spearheading the reform of France. The initial phase witnessed a struggle between the Third Estate and conservative elements within the Noble and Clerical orders, vying for leadership in the Estates General. Subsequently, the power struggle unfolded between the king and the National Assembly, vying to establish the contours of the nascent constitutional order. Regrettably, Louis XVI's leadership fell short in effectuating the indispensable reforms.

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