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# *Analysing the French Revolution*

Michael Adcock Fourth Edition



ISBN 978-1-108-87405-2

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# CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom  
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA  
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India  
79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

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First published 2005  
Second Edition 2009  
Third Edition 2015  
Fourth Edition 2021

20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Cover designed by Carolina Kerr  
Text designed by Claire Atteia  
Typeset by Integra Software Services Pvt. Ltd.  
Printed in Malaysia by Vivar Printing

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia at [www.nla.gov.au](http://www.nla.gov.au)*

ISBN 978-1-108-87405-2 Paperback

Additional resources for this publication at [www.cambridge.edu.au/GO](http://www.cambridge.edu.au/GO)

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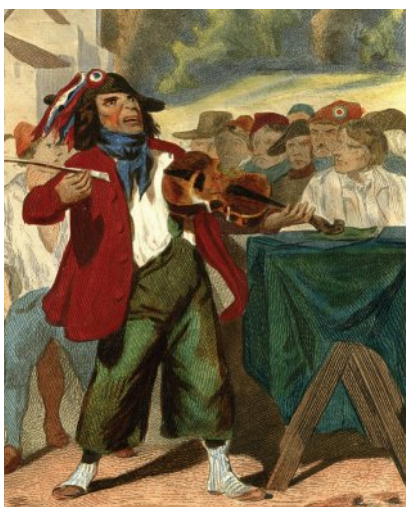
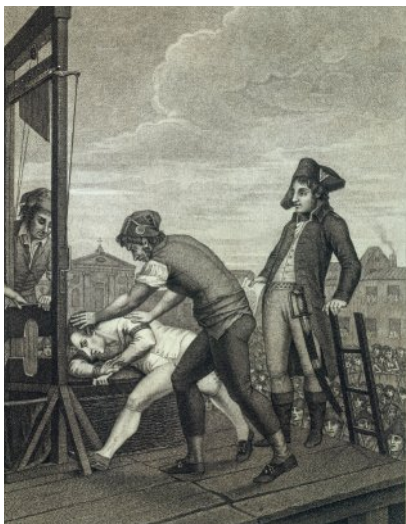
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## Foreword

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What a fine student text this is! Michael Adcock has produced a treasure trove of insights into revolutionary France while also providing a lucid, logical narrative for students. He has succeeded in capturing the heroism and the horrors, the ideals and the sacrifices of this extraordinary, fascinating period.

The French Revolution of 1789–99 was one of the great turning points of modern history. The Bourbon regime, based on absolute monarchy and ‘corporate’ privileges for the church and nobility, and the feudal system, gave way to a new society based on constitutional government, popular sovereignty, and equality of status between citizens and religions. This had repercussions across Europe and around the world. But the cost was enormous: before the revolution was stabilised, hundreds of thousands of men and women had died in external wars and civil war, and many more had had their spiritual and occupational lives destroyed.

Have these sacrifices been in vain? After all the upheavals and loss of life by the time of the Constitution of 1795, had the objectives of the revolution been achieved? Or had power simply shifted from the King and his noble elite to a new elite of wealthy commoners? In what ways had life been transformed for the mass of French people? Michael suggests important ways in which politics and society would never be the same again.

Michael did his own PhD research on the relationship of art and society in France. He has a profound knowledge of French visual representation, from great paintings to cartoons, and a capacity to tease out what they have to tell us about politics and society. His passion for the visual record of the past shines through. This is a richly illustrated book, with many lesser-known and fascinating images. They are complemented by several superbly executed maps. Students will benefit immensely from them, as they will from the practical guides to study, further reading and key dates.

Students are indeed fortunate to have access to such an expert and thoughtful text, written and designed with their learning uppermost in mind. The French Revolution was a complex, highly charged period, but Michael makes it accessible to us, while evoking its passion and its status as one of the great revolutions of history.

Professor Peter McPhee AM  
The University of Melbourne





## About the author

**Dr Michael Adcock** is the Head of History at Melbourne Grammar School. He is also a lecturer, author and tour guide, who specialises in the social and cultural history of France. Michael regularly presents illustrated lectures for the History Teachers' Association of Victoria, Modern History Seminars and the National Gallery of Victoria. His published works focus on the history of the French Revolution and include a recent work on the Enlightenment. Michael is also the tour leader for Academy Travel in Sydney and conducts residential study tours in French history in Paris.





## Acknowledgements

I am profoundly indebted to a number of people for their expertise in French studies. First, I must acknowledge the formative influence of the incomparable Melbourne scholar Dr Alison Patrick, who first inspired my interest in the French Revolution and involved me in her research projects.

I am also deeply indebted to Professor Peter McPhee (University of Melbourne), who allowed me to develop my teaching in this area by entrusting his 'Age of Revolutions' course to me. In doing so, he made it possible for me to have the inimitable experience of teaching at a tertiary level.

Third, I would like to acknowledge the fine scholarship and teaching of Professor Charles Sowerwine, who was an unfailing mentor and thesis supervisor during the years when I was developing my method of social and cultural history. I owe to him the evolution of my theory of the 'instrumental' use of culture, particularly in times of political upheaval and revolution.

I would also like to acknowledge how much I have learned from discussions with my students at the University of Melbourne, at Geelong Grammar School, at Caulfield Grammar School and now at Melbourne Grammar School; they have prompted me to further explore the nature of the revolutionary experience. I am also deeply grateful to my many colleagues who gave me generous encouragement and advice for this publication, especially Ms Judy Anderson (Melbourne Girls Grammar School).

I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to the two people who have made this book what it is. First, the Cambridge publisher Mr Nick Alexander was instrumental in transforming the original book into the splendid second and third editions. Mr. Alexander showed absolutely exceptional dedication, vision and creativity, and his enthusiasm resulted in a quantum leap in the quality of the book's presentation.

Second, the subsequent Cambridge publisher, Mr Cameron Pikó, showed enormous strategic sense and clear sightedness when he undertook the task of both restructuring the whole book and of rewriting some sections to make it compliant to the new VCE Study Design for Revolutions, beginning in 2021. When publishers approach their work with such professionalism and passion, the result is excellence.

Finally, I would particularly like to thank Professor Peter McPhee for writing the foreword to this book, originally written for the third edition, one of his many acts of the collegial generosity for which he is renowned.

Michael Adcock



## How to use this resource

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### Structure

- This textbook is broken into two sections, each aligning with an Area of Study in the VCAA History: Revolutions Study Design
- **Area of Study openers** give a broad overview of the chapters to come and a timeline of key events
- **Chapter openers** also include an overview, listing the key issues of the chapter and a flow diagram
- **QR codes** are included in all chapters for easy access to related videos
- Look out for icons flagging **key events**, **quotes** and **statistics** in the margins for use in revision
- A **selected bibliography** is supplied at the end of the book for each chapter, offering suggested further reading

### Activities

- **Focus questions** are placed throughout the chapter to assess comprehension and encourage discussion
- **Analysis activities** explore key primary and secondary historical sources. These sources can be visual or text-based, to help develop your understanding of the revolution as well as your skills as a historian.

### Develop your historical thinking skills

The end of chapter review activities include a combination of tasks to help consolidate your learning:

- **Define key terms** encourages you to write definitions of important terms in your own words
- **Activities** can include research work or various creative tasks like role-plays
- **Establishing historical significance** and **Analysing cause and consequence** are exam-style writing tasks that allow you to practise paragraph-length answers
- **Constructing historical arguments** are practice essay questions that allow you to prepare for internal and end-of-year assessment
- **Analysing historical sources** as evidence provides practice for exam-style source analysis, both textual and visual
- **Analysing historian's interpretations** focuses on arguments made by individual historians and encourages you to put forth your own views

## Digital resources

For a list of links to all the websites referred to in this book, go to: [www.cambridge.edu.au/revfrench4ed](http://www.cambridge.edu.au/revfrench4ed)

Further digital resources are available in the **Interactive Textbook** and on *Cambridge GO*:

- **PDF textbook** – downloadable, contains note taking and search functions
- **Interactive activities** – (e.g. drag and drop questions) assist recall of facts and understanding of concepts
- **Videos and links to history** – additional sources to watch read and analyse

The **Teacher Resource Package** also includes:

- Teaching programs and teaching tips
- Curriculum grids for each topic area
- **Suggested responses**
- **Practice Assessment Material**

## Understanding icons

The following icons are used throughout the textbook to indicate different activities, resources, or points of view.



**Analysis activity – textual analysis:**

Source analysis questions focusing on speeches or text extracts



**Analysis activity – visual analysis:**

Source analysis questions focusing on artwork or photos



**Significant Individuals:**

Biographies on significant individuals of the Revolution



**Key historian:**

Snapshots of important historians and their points of view on the Revolution



**Key statistic, events, quotes:**

Indicators of particularly memorable quotes, statistics and events



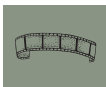
**Historical interpretations:**

Examines the differences between the opinions of historians



**Digital activities:**

See the Interactive Textbook for access to digital resources



**The story so far video:**

Summary videos on the chapter, available through the Interactive Textbook or through QR codes

# French revolutionary governments at a glance

| Legislature   | Executive   | Key features   | Key events  |
|---|---|--|---|
| The National Constituent Assembly (June 1789 to September 1791) was a single-house parliament   | Executive government by Louis XVI and his ministers     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Constitutional monarchy</li> <li>Constitution of 1791 drafted</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Responds to peasant revolt, Great Fear, August Decrees (August 1789)</li> <li>Writes Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen (August 1789)</li> <li>Achieves total reorganisation of France, 1789–90</li> <li>Writes Civil Constitution of Clergy, 1790</li> <li>Deals with flight to Varennes crisis, 1791</li> <li>Champ de Mars Massacre, July 1791</li> <li>King accepts Constitution, September 1791</li> </ul>        |
| The Legislative Assembly (October 1791 to September 1792) was a single-house parliament   | Executive government by Louis XVI and his ministers     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Constitutional monarchy</li> <li>Constitution of 1791 still in place</li> <li>All new men due to Robespierre's self-denying ordinance</li> <li>A brief but very significant parliament</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Passes harsh laws against <i>émigré</i> nobles and refractory priests</li> <li>Radical group led by Brissot urges declaration of war on Austria, April 1792</li> <li>Louis uses suspensive veto to block punitive laws</li> <li>First <i>sans-culottes</i> invasion of Tuileries, 20 June 1792</li> <li>Decree of Country in Danger, July 1792</li> <li>Overthrow of monarchy, 10 August 1792</li> </ul>                     |
| The National Convention (September 1792 to October 1795) was a single-house parliament  | Committee of Public Safety (April 1793 to October 1795) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A republic based on France's most democratic ever constitution (Constitution of 1793)</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Severe military defeat (Longwy, Verdun)</li> <li>September Massacres, 1792</li> <li>Proclamation of Republic, September 1792</li> <li>Execution of Louis XVI, January 1793</li> <li>War of First Coalition</li> <li>Establishment of Terror: Representatives on Mission, Revolutionary Tribunal</li> <li>Thermidor – fall of Robespierre and Jacobins, July 1794</li> <li>The White Terror, Thermidorian reaction</li> </ul> |
| The Directory (October 1795 to November 1799) was a two-house parliament: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Council of 500</li> <li>Council of Ancients</li> </ul> | The Directors (a strong executive arm)                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A conservative republic, based on restricting political participation to men of age and property</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Constitution of the Year III (1795) approved, September 1795</li> <li>Napoleon Bonaparte crushes royalist uprising of Vendémiaire</li> <li>Directory established, November 1795</li> </ul>   |

# Area of Study 1

## Causes of revolution: The development of significant ideas, events, individuals and popular movements in France, 10 May 1774 to 4 August 1789

*Popular violence was a continuing theme in French history well before 1789. In that year, though, it acquired a new importance. The action of the Parisian mob and of countless peasants and inhabitants of small towns all over the country made possible a real and unprecedented disruption of old continuities. Without this popular revolution, the Constituent [Assembly] would have had no power.*

– J.M. ROBERTS, 1997

### Overview

On 14 July each year, the French celebrate their official national holiday, Bastille Day, commemorating the momentous day in 1789 when the Parisian crowd captured a royal fortress that was being used as a prison in the heart of Paris. This victory of the crowd was certainly a turning point in French history because it firmly established that King Louis XVI would have to come to terms with demands for a constitution and a parliament.

Two hundred years later, in 1989, the French nation had to decide how it would celebrate the bicentenary of these events. But what was being celebrated? The capture of the Bastille was itself a violent uprising that resulted in 98 tragic deaths among the people, and seven brutal and unnecessary murders of royal soldiers. This revolution, like many others, would involve violence, destruction and, most disturbingly, the use of **Terror** and the guillotine. Many a French citizen who has sung the national anthem, ‘La Marseillaise’, has paused to wonder at the violent, bloody images it contains. In France, the celebration of the bicentenary became a virtual battlefield over the issue of how a violent revolution should be celebrated. Despite these concerns, there could be no doubt that the French Revolution had created the foundations for the modern state of France we know today.

Yet, when Louis XVI was crowned King of France in June 1775, the political system of which he was head had already lasted for centuries and showed no signs of a fatal weakness that might cause such a collapse. Although the French monarchy had suffered a number of crises in previous years – such as the civil war (or Fronde) in 1648 – none of these crises had caused the system to collapse. Historians therefore feel that there must be something special about the years 1763–89 that can explain the sudden crisis of 1787–89.

**Terror** the deliberate use of violence by government to discourage and repress its enemies

Historians have put forward different theories about the causes of revolution. Before developing our own explanation as to why the **old regime** collapsed, we must understand these theories. To gain a complete picture, we will need to analyse and evaluate a range of historical evidence to construct a coherent argument about the crisis of the old regime and to demonstrate awareness of this historical debate.

**old regime**  
French society  
before the  
revolution

Serious crises rarely have just one cause. They are usually created by an interlocking set of problems. We must examine a broad spectrum of problems and ask why the regime failed to respond appropriately to social change, as well as why the traditional political and social order could not respond to new political and social forces. We must also explain why people lost confidence in the existing order and why they began to doubt its **legitimacy**.

**legitimacy**  
sense of  
rightness

Revolutions are not caused solely by pressures from below: there can also be rifts (divisions) within the ruling class that weaken its capacity to meet the revolutionary challenge. We must therefore recognise that the French Revolution began as a ‘crisis at the top’, although it quickly moved to involve other social classes. The first stage of the revolution is often referred to, rather loosely, as ‘the aristocratic revolt’, and much of the resistance to the king initially came from people who were already in positions of power within the system of the old regime.

The French have a long tradition of revolutionary action. The French Revolution of 1789–99 was followed by the revolution of 1830 (which overthrew Louis XVI’s brother), by two more revolutions in February and June 1848, and the revolutionary uprising of the Paris Commune in 1870. More recently, student riots in 1968 have been described, loosely, as a revolution. We can see the same tradition at work in 2020 in the cleverly organised protests of the *gilets jaunes* (yellow vests) who criticise the cost of living under President Emmanuel Macron. In one demonstration, protesters made their point by carrying a portrait of Louis XVI, whose face had been altered to be that of Macron. For the French, their great revolution of 1789 remains something that is ‘good to think with’.

The chapters in Area of Study 1 are designed to help you understand how a revolutionary situation developed in France between 1774 and August 1789.



▲ Source 1A Macron depicted as Louis XVI during a protest of the *gilet jaunes*

## Timeline of key events, 10 May 1774 to 4 August 1789

### 1774

- ▶ **10 May:** After the death of his father Louis XV, 19-year-old Louis-Auguste becomes King of France

### 1775

- ▶ **11 June:** Louis-Auguste is officially crowned King of France and Navarre in Reims Cathedral in a lavish ceremony

### 1776

- ▶ France commits substantial financial and military aid to American colonists in their revolutionary war for independence against the British, putting enormous financial strain on the French economy

### 1781

- ▶ **19 February:** Director-General of Finances, Jacques Necker, presents his financial report to King Louis XVI
- ▶ **19 May:** Necker resigns his position as Minister of Finance
- ▶ **25 May:** Joly de Fleury is appointed Minister of Finance

### 1782

- ▶ **July:** The king imposes a third additional tax for the period 1783–86

### 1783

- ▶ **3 September:** France signs the Treaty of Versailles, ending the conflict with Britain over the American colonies; France is left with high accumulated debts from the conflict
- ▶ **3 November:** Calonne is appointed Controller-General (Minister of Finances)

### 1785

- ▶ **August:** The scandal of the Diamond Necklace Affair tarnishes the reputation of Queen Marie-Antoinette; Necker publishes his views on the need for financial reform

### 1786

- ▶ **20 August:** Calonne proposes financial reforms to the king

### 1787

- ▶ **22 February:** The king convenes the Assembly of Notables to discuss fiscal reform
- ▶ **8 April:** The king dismisses reforming finance minister Calonne and appoints Brienne in his place
- ▶ **25 May:** The king closes the Assembly of Notables
- ▶ **August:** The law courts (*parlements*) of Paris and Bordeaux rebel against the king's authority and are exiled
- ▶ **19 November:** The king exerts authority upon the law courts in the royal session

▲ **Source 1B** A painting of Comte de Mirabeau giving a speech at the National Assembly, June 1789



**1788**

- ▶ **3 May:** The Paris *parlement* states that the king has a duty to submit new laws to the *parlements* and that new taxes can only be imposed by agreement with the nation, as represented by the Estates-General
- ▶ **8 May:** The king tries to disempower the *parlements* by redefining their role and powers
- ▶ **June to July:** The revolution's first phase is often described as the noble revolt because resistance came from the Assembly of Notables and *parlements*, but resistance also came from urban crowds that supported these law courts
- ▶ **8 August:** The king calls a meeting of Estates-General for May 1789
- ▶ **16 August:** The royal treasury suspends payments, a virtual equivalent of bankruptcy
- ▶ **24 August:** Finance Minister Brienne resigns; the more popular Necker is recalled
- ▶ **25 September:** The king reopens the *parlements*; the Paris *parlement* demands that the Estates-General meet and vote by order
- ▶ **October to December:** The Assembly of Notables meets again to discuss the organisation of the Estates-General
- ▶ **27 December:** Concession of doubling of the number of deputies for the Third Estate

**1789**

- ▶ **24 January:** Formal call for Estates-General to meet
- ▶ **January:** Publication of Sieyès' *What is the Third Estate?*
- ▶ **February–May:** Election of deputies to the Estates-General at Versailles; drafting of Books of Grievances
- ▶ **27–28 April:** Crowds attack and destroy Réveillon factory – class conflict?
- ▶ **5 May:** Opening of the Estates-General; the king maintains traditional honorific distinctions between orders
- ▶ **6 May:** Controversy over voting by order or by head; the Third Estate demands voting by head
- ▶ **20–22 May:** Clergy and nobility accept the principle of equality in taxation
- ▶ **13 June:** Some parish priests join the Third Estate
- ▶ **17 June:** The revolution's second stage is loosely described as the bourgeois revolt because the Third Estate deputies claimed a new constitutional role for themselves, but liberal nobles and priests also supported them
- ▶ **20 June:** The Third Estate retreats to a commercial tennis court and swears not to disband until there is a constitution
- ▶ **23 June:** The National Assembly defies the royal order to return to discussion by order
- ▶ **25 June:** A deputation of nobles joins the Third Estate
- ▶ **27 June:** The three orders unite
- ▶ **30 June:** The king orders troops to Paris
- ▶ **2–10 July:** Despite popular protests against the troops' presence, the king refuses to withdraw them
- ▶ **11–13 July:** Increasing agitation in Paris; the king dismisses Necker; the third stage of the revolution is often called the revolt of the urban working classes – Desmoulins exhorts the people to arm themselves
- ▶ **14 July:** The capture of the Bastille
- ▶ **16 July:** The king capitulates – the troops are withdrawn and Necker is recalled
- ▶ **22 July:** The crowd brutally murders royal officials Foulon and Berthier
- ▶ **Late July:** The peasant revolt – the gradual escalation of rumour and fear in country areas – leads to rural rebellions ('the Great Fear')
- ▶ **4 August:** The Night of Patriotic Delirium



# 1 THE POLITICAL ORDER IN FRANCE BEFORE THE REVOLUTION

*These institutions were not formed by chance, and time cannot change them. To abolish them, the whole French constitution would have to be overturned.*

– A STATEMENT BY THE PARIS PARLEMENT IN A PROTEST TO THE KING, 1776

## Overview

A revolution's main aim is to overthrow one political system and to create a new one. The nature of the existing regime in France before 1789 provides clues to the causes of the revolution. What problems and pressures were affecting France's royal government in the eighteenth century? Why was it unwilling or unable to make changes that might have saved it?

In France, the political system was an **absolute monarchy**, in which a king ruled with almost complete personal authority, unaccountable to a parliament. The French monarchy had been formed progressively during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but it formed into a powerful regime during the reign of Louis XIV (1643–1715), known as 'the Sun King'.

Although the power of the monarchy decreased during the Regency era and the reign of Louis XV, this alone does not explain the sudden crisis and complete collapse of this regime in 1787–89. The king's authority was still considerable because it was made up of a number of interwoven elements of power.



**absolute monarchy (absolutism)** a political system in which the monarch rules personally, without being accountable to an elected parliament

## Key issues

- What were the elements that made up the king's authority?
- What were the limits to the king's power?
- What were the contradictions and inefficiencies of the absolute monarchy?
- What was the importance of public perceptions of the king?
- Who was Louis XVI?

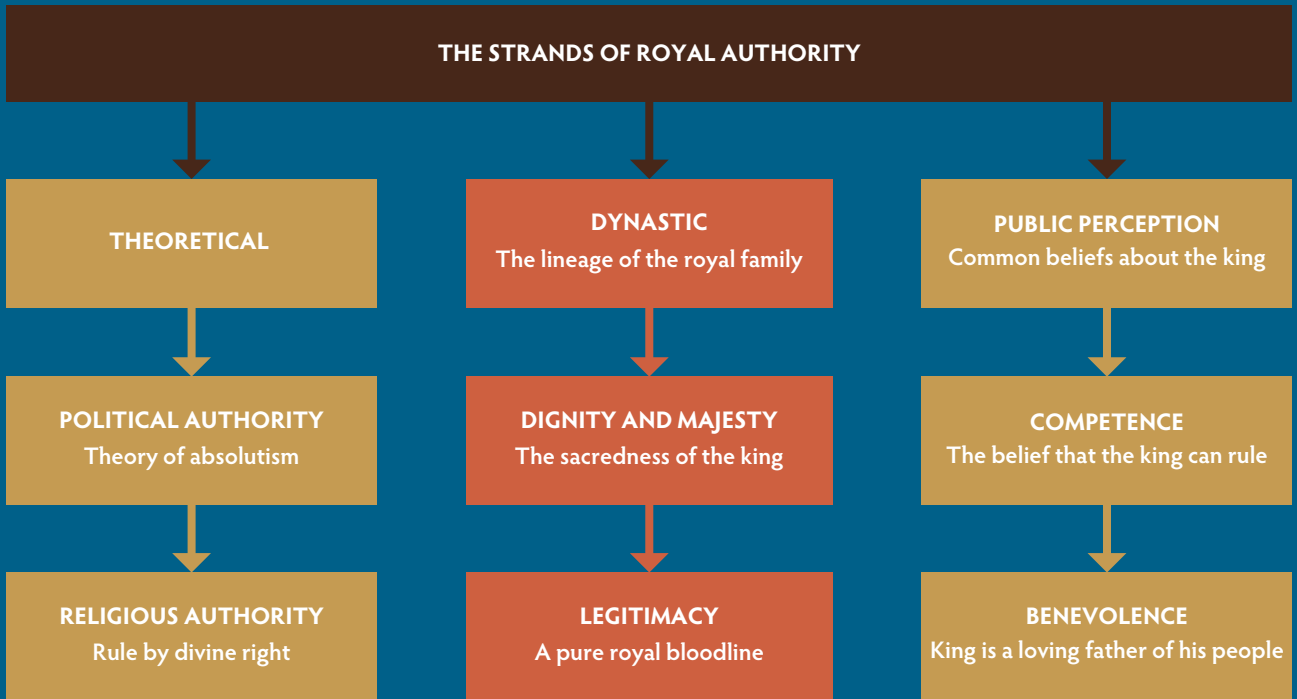
## Digital resources for this chapter

In the *Interactive Textbook*:

-  video and audio sources and questions
-  digital activities.

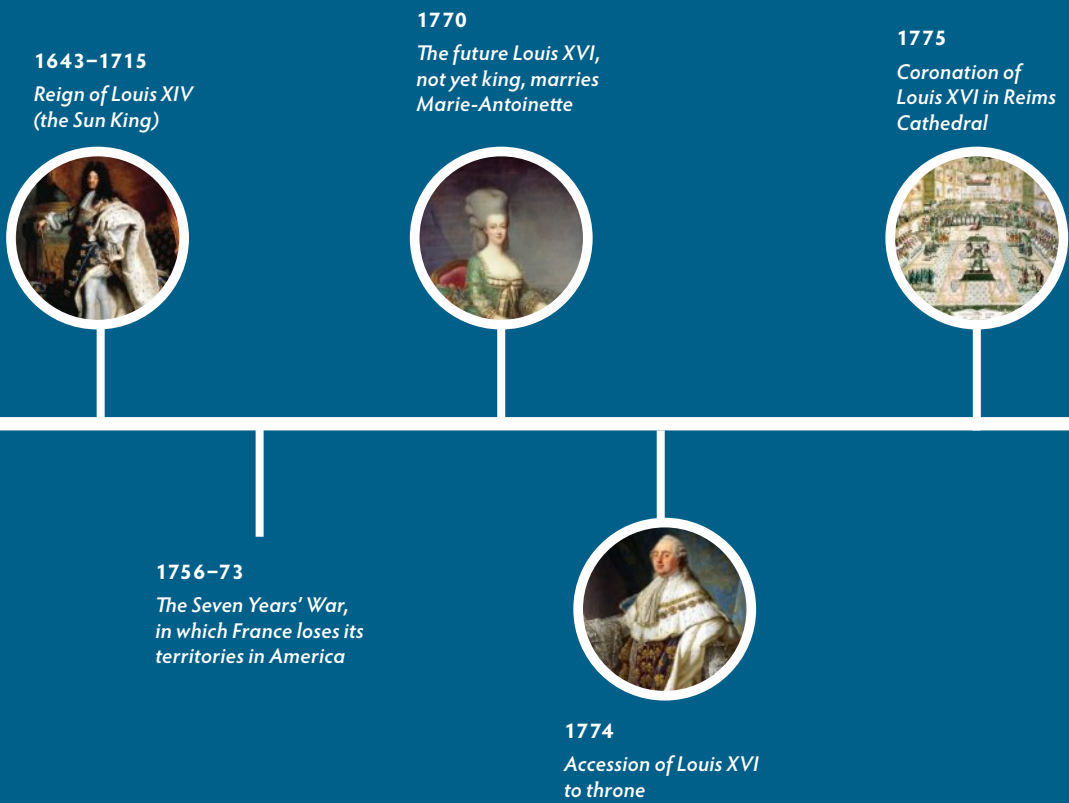
◀ **Source 1.0** *Mythological portrait of the family of Louis XIV*, Jean Nocret, 1670

# Flow of chapter



8

# Chapter timeline



# 1.1 What were the elements that made up the king's authority?

## The political theory of absolute monarchy

The most important aspect of power is the theoretical basis of authority. This is a set of understandings about the king as an absolute ruler. These understandings were defined by the powerful Louis XIV during his long personal reign (1661–1715).

His spokesman, the French bishop Jacques Bossuet, stated:

*In the exercise of lawful authority the king is, and ought to be, absolute; that is so far absolute that there is no legal authority which can delay or resist him.*

### ANALYSIS ACTIVITY 1.1: READING A PRIMARY SOURCE



#### An image of royal power

The emphasis on the single figure of King Louis XIV reminds us that absolute monarchy was a form of personal rule by one monarch, which could not be questioned by any representative body. In Louis XIV's *Reflections Upon the Role of a King*, he had stated, 'The nation is not embodied in France, it resides entirely in the person of the king.'

- 1 How does this painting remind people of the enormous personal power of the king in an absolute monarchy?
- 2 What messages is King Louis XIV trying to communicate to you, the viewer, by his pose, his expression and the symbols he holds?
- 3 How do some of the objects in the painting symbolise King Louis XIV's royal powers?



► Source 1.1 Portrait of King Louis XIV, painted in 1701 by Hyacinthe Rigaud

France did not have a written constitution. The definition of royal power was contained partly in assorted documents – such as *The Fundamental Laws of the Kingdom* – and, more simply, in accepted practices. By these documents and understandings, the king had the power to pass laws, appoint ministers, declare war and peace, impose taxes and control the nation's currency.



## The theory of rule by divine right

The political theory of absolute monarchy was reinforced by religious belief: the French king received his power directly from God and was considered infallible. He ruled by ‘divine right’.

Bossuet stated that:

*the king in his palace is the image of God in his heaven, who sets the whole of nature in motion.*

To criticise the king was to criticise God. The divine nature of the king was displayed in traditional ceremonies in which he cured the sick by touching them.

### ANALYSIS ACTIVITY 1.2: ANALYSIS OF A PRIMARY SOURCE



#### The speech of M. de Lamoignon on royal authority, 19 November 1787

*These principles, universally recognised by the nation to be true, prove that sovereign [absolute] power in the kingdom belongs to the king alone. That he has only to account to God alone for the exercise of his supreme power. That the bond uniting the king and the nation can never be dissolved. That mutual interests and duties between the king and his subjects assure the perpetuity of this union. That the nation’s interests require that the rights of its ruler should not be altered. That the king is the sovereign head of the nation and is one with the nation. Finally, that the legislative power resides in the person of the king, independently, and cannot be divided.*

Source 1.2 Quoted in Paul Beik, *The French Revolution: Selected Documents*, 1970

- 1 How does this document explain the principle of ‘rule by divine right’?
- 2 How does this document explain the relationship between ‘the king’ and the subjects who form ‘the nation’?
- 3 Does the writer believe that the king’s legislative role (his power to make laws) can be shared with anybody else?

**Council of State** the king’s cabinet of ministers

**governors** otherwise known as *intendants*; chosen by the king to apply his policies in provincial France

The king exercised complete control of the executive functions of government, such as declaring war and making peace. He gave direct orders to his cabinet of ministers in the **Council of State**. Since the king could replace ministers at

will, few dared to reveal problems or suggest unpopular policies. The king’s personal authority controlled provincial France by a network of royal **governors** (*intendants*), chosen by him to apply his policies in their area. The king’s understanding of the state of the nation was only as good as the reports he received from these ministers and governors.



### FOCUS QUESTIONS 1.1

- 1 Why was the king’s authority a very personal, indeed almost absolute, form of rule?
- 2 In what way did the Catholic Church confirm and strengthen the power of the king?

▲ Source 1.3 King Louis IX of France (1214–1270) was commonly known as ‘Saint Louis’ because he was a canonised saint.

## 1.2 Limits to the king's power

The French distinguished between **absolute power**, which gave the king ultimate control, and **arbitrary power** or **despotism**, by which a king ruled badly without respect for existing laws. He was expected to obey the nation's traditions and laws. In reality, he ruled beside provincial assemblies and other special groups enjoying their own traditional powers.

Historian William Doyle has said that, while none of these groups actually challenged royal authority between 1614 and 1789, they certainly placed some constraints on royal power. The most significant were the highest law courts in the system of justice.

**absolute power** gave the king ultimate control

**arbitrary power** or **despotism** by which a king ruled badly, without respect for existing laws

### The high law courts challenge royal authority, 1771–74

In France, the **highest courts of appeal** were called *parlements* (not to be confused with the English word 'parliament'). These 13 law courts checked and registered royal laws. This process ensured that all courts had received and cross-checked copies of the laws. It was never intended as a check upon the king's powers.

The courts had the power to make a **remonstrance**, a private memo informing the king that registration had been delayed because they had identified some technical problem in the wording of the law. During the reign of Louis XV, many judges decided that they should act to challenge the power of the king and began to use the remonstrance to express political opposition to the monarchy.

**highest courts of appeal** otherwise known as *parlements*; these 13 high courts checked and registered royal laws

**parlements** the highest courts of appeal in France

**remonstrance** a memo from the law courts to the king, pointing out a problem in the wording of a law

The flashpoint occurred in the 1750s and 1760s when the *parlements* actually prevented Louis XV from increasing taxes and from creating other law courts. In the provinces, the *parlements* resisted the king's governors. By 1770, the king had crushed this opposition: he ordered his chancellor, Maupeou, to strip the courts of many of their powers, to dismiss half of the judges and to create new law courts. From 1771 until 1774, the flashpoint seemed to be over. In 1774, however, the new king, Louis XVI, tried to win over the *parlements* by restoring them. Although they cautiously did not resume opposition to royal policy, they would cause further problems at the time of the monarchy's greatest crisis.

## 1.3 The contradictions and inefficiencies of the monarchy

To understand the discontent in France in the 1780s, we must understand the institutions of the old regime and how people suffered from their inefficiencies, inequalities and contradictions. William Doyle's detailed description of the structures of the old regime makes it clear that it was not one system of government but rather a number of overlapping systems, many of them competing with each other. Administratively, the old regime was an untidy jumble of administration, justice, local taxes and religious institutions. No person enjoyed the same treatment as everybody else in administrative, religious or legal matters: it depended entirely upon where a person lived and which set of systems was in force there.



## 1.4 The importance of public perceptions of the king

### public perceptions

commonly accepted beliefs

The king's absolute political authority was supplemented by **public perceptions** of his role. Common perceptions of power have to be created. Cultural historian Peter Burke has shown recently that Louis XIV not only forged the structures of monarchical power, but also created a convincing machinery of publicity for that power. He created the 'little academy', which, like a modern public-image consultancy, was responsible for creating a coherent set of representations of King XIV. It created a large, unified collection of paintings, statues, medallions and literary works to glorify the all-powerful 'Sun King'. Once culture had been adapted to the use of power, later kings – such as Louis XV and Louis XVI – would never fail to use it.

### Public belief in the king's competence

Although ordinary people rarely glimpsed the king's residence, **Versailles**, or the workings of royal government, there was nonetheless a common assumption that the king was capable of ruling competently. This assumption was reinforced by the production of large oil paintings and engravings showing the king at work, directing the affairs of the nation. The king could thus rely on some public faith in his abilities; however, should there be a serious crisis that became public knowledge, his credibility would be seriously weakened.

**Versailles** the palace that housed French kings from 1682, when Louis XIV moved the royal seat of power from Paris, to early in the revolution in 1789 (by then, Versailles had become a symbol of all that was wrong with the old regime)

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► **Source 1.4** In this image, the official royal artist shows the activity of King Louis XIV's little academy in producing images of the monarch. The figures are symbolic rather than realistic. In the background, there is a large printing press on which hundreds of copies of engravings could be made.





▲ **Source 1.5** Monsiau, *Louis XVI Traces the Course of La Pérouse*, 1785. In this painting, the King's official artist shows Louis XVI carrying out the duties of kingship, directing and controlling the government's activities in matters such as exploration of new lands.

## Public belief in the royal dynasty

Compared with modern rulers, who often have no previous family history of power, the monarchs of the old regime enjoyed the prestige of belonging to a **dynasty**. Each decade of its rule reinforces the weight of continuity and tradition, so that successive monarchs are strengthened by added dynastic prestige. In the case of Louis XVI, the Bourbon dynasty dated back to 1589, when Henry IV ascended the throne.

**dynasty** a sequence of monarchs going back hundreds of years

▼ **Source 1.6** *The Presentation of the Portrait of Marie-Antoinette to the Dauphin, the Future Louis XVI, 1769*. French kings used engravings, such as this one, to show that they were a part of both a royal family and a long dynasty stretching back many years. Here, King Louis XV (seated) holds the hand of his grandson, the future Louis XVI, while they look at a portrait of his intended bride, Marie-Antoinette of Austria. The portraits on the walls depict previous members of the Bourbon dynasty.





### AMAZING BUT TRUE ...

Louis XVI first 'met' his intended bride, Marie-Antoinette of Austria, in 1769, when he was 15 years of age ... simply by being shown a portrait of her, sent from the Austrian court. When they did marry, in 1770, Marie-Antoinette had to go through a ceremony of stripping off all the clothing that her family had provided, stepping naked – through a specially constructed cabin – across the French border and then putting on a new set of clothes provided by Louis XVI.

## Public belief in benevolence

The belief in royal legitimacy and competence was reinforced by a third belief: that the king was 'father' and protector of his people. Traditionally, people could go directly to their ruler to seek assistance in cases of misfortune or injustice. The king enjoyed the patriarchal authority of a father over his family, and was assumed to protect his subjects' welfare. He therefore drew upon a certain amount of trust. However, if that sense of trust should be destroyed for any reason, public feeling could turn very strongly against him.

### FOCUS QUESTIONS 1.2

- 1 What were the three main beliefs and expectations that the French people held of their king?
- 2 How did the king ensure that these beliefs, and public confidence, were maintained?

▼ **Source 1.7** A painting of Louis XVI giving alms by Louis Hersent. The king's responsibility to be a benevolent, caring ruler is presented in this print, which shows him visiting an area of France to help the victims of a food shortage.



## 1.5

## SIGNIFICANT INDIVIDUAL



## King Louis XVI (his life from 1754 to 1789)

Louis-Auguste, the future Louis XVI, was born in 1754. In 1765, the death of both his father and his two brothers left him next in line to the throne, a position known as the 'Dauphin'. At 16 years of age, he was married to Marie-Antoinette of Austria in a diplomatic marriage to confirm peaceful relations between the previously warring nations, France and Austria. In 1775, he was crowned King of France.

Louis was criticised by revolutionaries and mocked by some historians for failing to handle the crisis of the French monarchy in the 1780s. However, it is likely that he misunderstood the power of the forces that were building up in late eighteenth-century France. He had great difficulty understanding the idea of limitations on his absolute power, lacked the strength to handle the political factions at the royal court, and when revolutionary events began to unfold, he was indecisive and failed to make decisions at crucial points.

(See Chapter 13 for a profile on Louis XVI's life between 1789 and 1793.)



▲ Source 1.8 Portrait of King Louis XVI in the coronation robes he wore in 1775. Painted by Antoine-François Callet.

## AMAZING BUT TRUE ...

King Louis XVI was fascinated by all aspects of science, including a wonderful machine designed by a certain Dr Guillotin to execute criminals in a swift, humane way. The King even helpfully suggested a way to make the blade sharper and more efficient.

## 1.6 The France of Louis XVI in 1774

Shortly after the death of Louis XV on 10 May 1774, Louis-Auguste, finding himself suddenly a king at the age of 19, announced that he was to be known simply by the name of Louis. Shortly afterwards, he wrote a request to the former royal adviser, the Comte de Maurepas, stating:

*I am only twenty years of age. I do not think that I have acquired all the knowledge that is needed. It is this that leads me to beg you to be so kind as to help me with your advice and understanding.*

He then asked Maurepas to come out of his exile at his estate and come to Versailles to serve him. We will never know how much training Louis XV gave him in the art of kingship; Louis-Auguste never attended the Council of Ministers, but he does appear to have had some understanding of state matters.

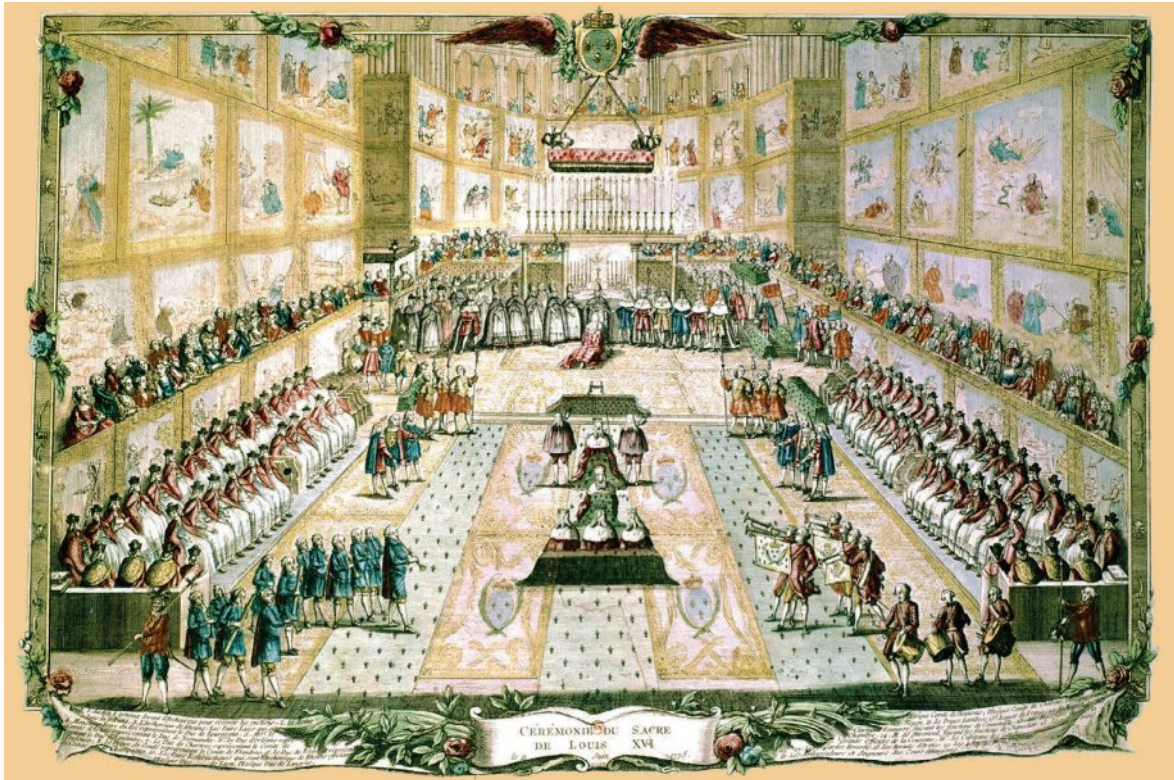
Louis inherited a kingdom that, in appearance at least, enjoyed a clearly defined territory, an imposing royal court at Versailles, and a clear political system based on absolute personal rule. However, within these firm structures were powerful new forces of change – new political ideas, social tensions and conflicts, and economic hardships – that he would have to understand and deal with. In some cases, he even agreed with the new ideas that were changing the way his people thought about the world around them.

This much must have been obvious to Louis on 11 June 1775, when he was crowned King of France and Navarre in Reims Cathedral. If we look at Louis XVI's portrait in coronation robes (Source 1.8), the



symbols of power seem unchanged, as was the ceremony, with its mystic application of holy oil dating back to the fifth century. But, if the ceremony was exactly the same, the times were not. For example, his treasurer, Turgot, cautiously advised him not to have too expensive a coronation in times of economic hardship. This was sensible advice, but Louis ignored it.

Louis XVI must surely have surveyed the France that he had inherited. Politically, the monarchy was still theoretically absolute, although the king's actions were limited by both Christian conscience and



▲ Source 1.9 Louis XVI's coronation in 1775



▲ Source 1.10 A crowd outside the Notre-Dame de Reims (Our Lady of Reims) Cathedral during Louis XVI's coronation

traditional ‘fundamental’ laws guaranteeing the rights of traditional bodies. In addition, it was really the royal government – the king and his ministers – that wielded absolute power, further expressed through the system of royal governors. However, the closure of the *parlements* by his predecessor was a sign not of royal authority but of its weaknesses. Louis XV had simply left him a serious political problem to solve.

Economically, the main question facing the French nation was the issue of free trade, especially in the crucial matter of the grains from which bread was made. In the first year of Louis’s reign, the return to free trade in grain provoked violent protests known as ‘flour wars’, in which even the palace of Versailles was threatened by an angry crowd. Later, the continuing food shortages and price rises may not directly have caused the revolution, but they certainly put his ordinary working people under more pressure and made them more volatile.

Militarily, France faced the task of building a powerful new navy capable of regaining colonial possessions. Louis accordingly gave strong support to the program, and also showed intense interest in the explorations of men such as La Pérouse. The construction of an expensive major port at Cherbourg also signalled France’s new ambitions. Specifically, France had recently lost vast landholdings in America and now looked eagerly for new colonial possessions. French planners could see that the greatest opportunities for trade would be in the rich sugar-producing islands of the Caribbean and English-speaking societies in the Atlantic region. It was urgent to embrace these opportunities; since the end of the Seven Years’ War in 1763, France had carried a massive debt of 2.324 billion French pounds, and the payment of interest instalments alone was consuming 60 per cent of the state budget.

Diplomatically, French policy would soon turn towards support for the rebellious 13 American colonies as they fought for their independence from Britain. The justification was that if a major new nation was to emerge in North America, France would be well repaid by lucrative trading contracts. But, according to historian Simon Schama, this policy specifically would ultimately cause the fall of the Bourbon monarchy.

In legal matters, France was still a corporate society, in which a number of special groups – clergy, nobles and even some towns – enjoyed special rights that were confirmed in law. However, Louis was aware of new ideas suggesting that privilege was wrong and that laws should apply universally to all subjects. Even people who held privileges were losing faith in them.

In religious matters, the Catholic Church was still the sole religion of the state, but educated public opinion was tending towards greater toleration of other faiths. Although Louis owed his allegiance to the church that confirmed his rule by divine right, even he would later grant tolerance to Protestants.

Intellectually, France had begun to change under the influence of the Enlightenment *philosophes*, which taught educated people to criticise political and religious authority. In contrast to early Bourbon kings, Louis XVI would have to deal with the birth of public opinion, whereby intelligent and capable people showed a keen interest in matters of state, especially the national budget.

**philosophes** the writers, or critical thinkers, who highlighted reason

In short, Louis XVI had indeed inherited the France that his predecessors had created but, like Louis XV, he would have to deal with quite new challenges to monarchical rule.

## THE STORY SO FAR

By the 1780s, the French king remained powerful and had several forms of authority. Absolute monarchy drew on a number of different strands of power, ranging from a political theory and religious authority to common perceptions of the king’s legitimacy, competence and benevolence. Its weakness was that only some of these understandings were documented. If, at some stage, the opponents of absolute royal authority were to question the origins and limits of power, then the system might be weakened.

Use the QR code or visit the digital version of the book and watch the video summarising the chapter.





## Develop your historical-thinking skills

### Using historical terms meaningfully

Write an extended paragraph explaining why the political system in France was causing tensions and new demands by the end of the eighteenth century. Use the following terms to show you understand their meaning and context:

- absolutism
- rule by divine right
- representation
- *parlement*
- despotism
- remonstrance.

### Establishing historical significance

- 1 What was the Council of State (Council of Ministers)? How was it different from a modern government? Why did the position of ministers mean it was almost impossible for them to make unpopular recommendations to the king?
- 2 How did the common belief in the king's competence add to his authority? How did French kings make use of forms of culture, such as large paintings, to strengthen this belief in the king's competence?
- 3 What did French people understand by their belief in the king's benevolence? How did this paternal image reinforce his royal authority?

### Constructing historical arguments

'While the French monarchy was strengthened by a number of forms of power, these same strengths were also potential weaknesses that might prevent the regime from responding effectively to a crisis.' To what extent do you agree with this statement?

### Using quotes as evidence

Write a sentence using a short phrase from one of the quotes below or contrast the views from a few of the quotes. You can also use any of the quotes in the chapter. Any quotes you choose can be used directly or paraphrased into your own words.

*The French monarchy lay midway between British constitutionalism and continental despotism.*  
**Georges Lefebvre, historian**

*The king of France needed no coronation. He reigned by the grace of God from the moment his predecessor breathed his last.*  
**William Doyle, historian**

*It increasingly appeared that the absolutist ... monarchy had failed France and was no longer appropriate to the times.*  
**Nigel Aston, historian**

## Analysing historian's interpretations

### Nicholas Henshall

In his book *The Myth of Absolutism*, historian Nicholas Henshall reminds us that the theory of absolutism was a respectable political theory, that the king had responsibilities as well as rights, and that he could not ignore the opinions of other political bodies, such as the provincial assemblies.

Henshall argues that we should not look at absolute monarchy through the eyes of nineteenth-century liberal thinkers, who hated this earlier form of political authority:

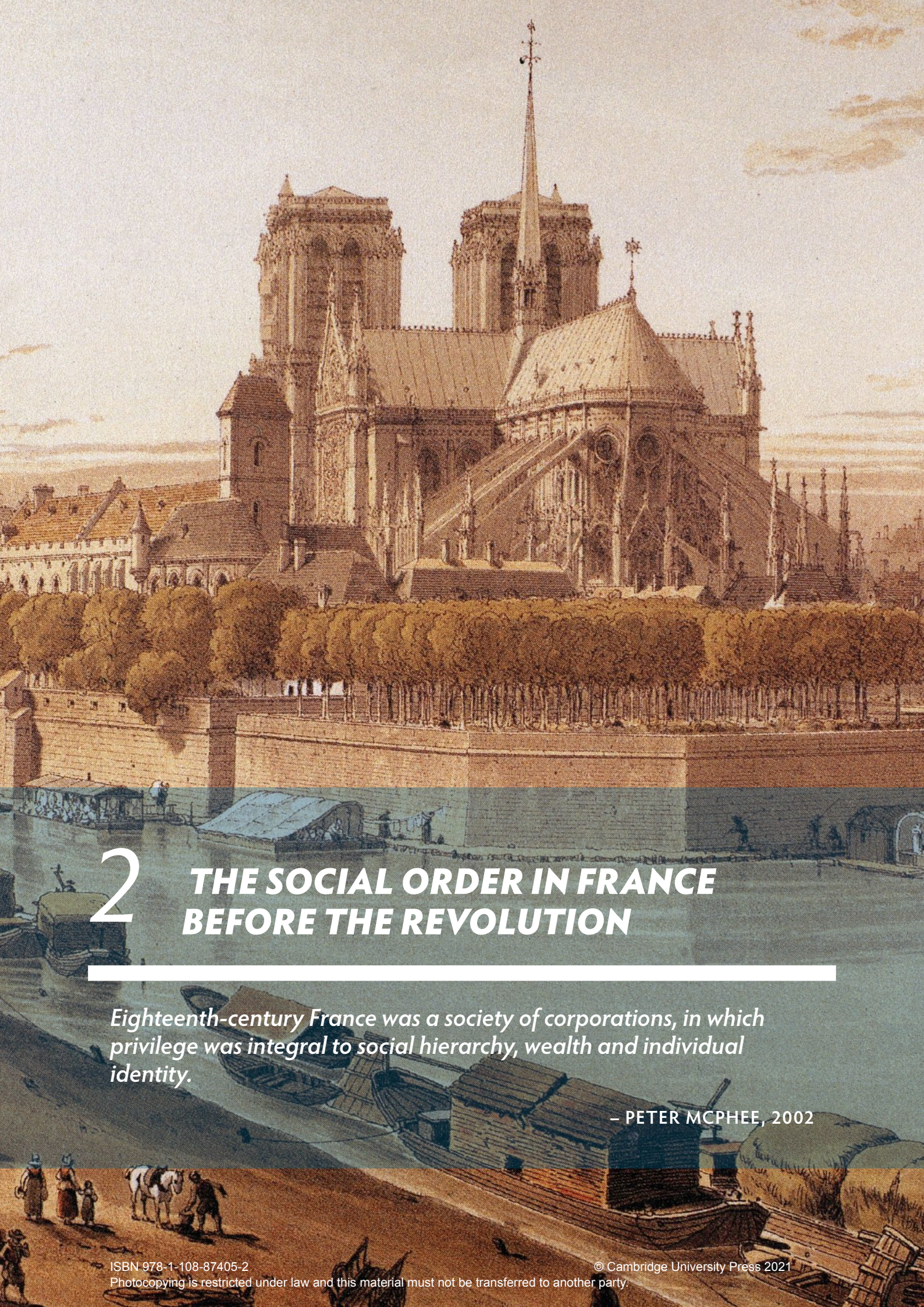
*In the last days of the [old regime], French kings did act despotically, in search of shortcuts to desirable reforms for which no consent was forthcoming. But no Frenchman equated despotism with his constitution. Until quite late in 1789 the old constitution was what most wanted. Despotism was seen as its negation.*

**Source 1.11** *The Myth of Absolutism*, Nicholas Henshall, 1992

- 1 According to Henshall, the eighteenth-century system of 'absolute monarchy' made sense to contemporary people and was not as bad as the 'absolutism' that historians condemned in the nineteenth century. How does Henshall see the differences between the two?
- 2 If the absolute monarchy was not an intrinsically bad system, why did people start to use the word 'despotism' in 1789?



▲ **Source 1.12** Nicholas Henshall



# 2

## **THE SOCIAL ORDER IN FRANCE BEFORE THE REVOLUTION**

*Eighteenth-century France was a society of corporations, in which privilege was integral to social hierarchy, wealth and individual identity.*

– PETER MCPHEE, 2002



## Overview

Revolutions change governments and also the social systems in which people live. They redefine how social groups are named and change the social values by which people live. Most importantly, revolutions cause changes in the way people *feel* about themselves and their relationship with other citizens.

To properly understand the changes in France between 1789 and 1795, we must first understand the social system of eighteenth-century France. This society differed from ours in many important ways. For example, there was no expectation of equal rights for everybody, regardless of wealth; people were unequal, because different groups in society enjoyed their own **privileges**. People accepted these inequalities because they were confirmed by law and strengthened by tradition, as seen with the culture of **deference**.

**privileges**  
special rights in  
matters of law  
and taxation



**deference**  
showing  
respect to your  
social betters

## Key issues

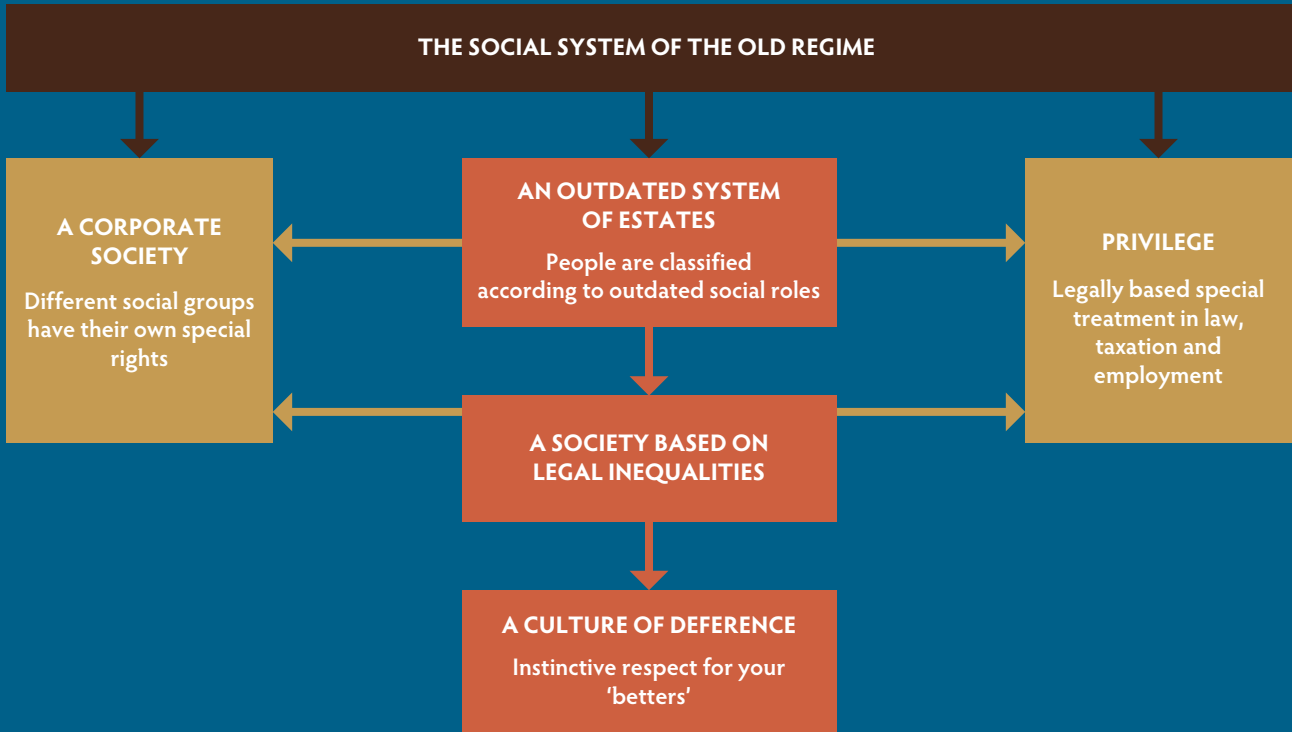
- What was corporate society and what was privilege?
- What was the culture of deference or respect for your ‘betters’?
- What were the Three Estates or orders?

## Digital resources for this chapter

In the *Interactive Textbook*:

-  video and audio sources and questions
-  digital activities.

# Flow of chapter



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# Chapter timeline

## THE MIDDLE AGES (ELEVENTH TO FIFTEENTH CENTURIES)

*The tradition of the three estates develops*



## SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

*Nobles of the robe are allowed to pay to make their title hereditary*



## SIXTEENTH CENTURY

*A new category of aristocracy, the 'nobility of the robe', is created*



## 1700s TO 1780s

*The new class of the bourgeoisie makes its money in business and aspires to play a role in the political life of France*

## 2.1 The corporate society and privilege

France of the old regime was a **corporate society** – that is, made up of a number of powerful groups, each enjoying its own special customs, laws and privileges. Today in Australia, we are citizens of a modern democratic state and we expect that the laws of our nation apply equally to everybody, whatever their income level; however, people in pre-revolutionary France accepted that inequality between them was right and natural.

**corporate society** a society made up of a number of powerful groups, each enjoying its own special customs, laws and privileges

### Privilege: Special rights for some social groups

The key concept of this society was privilege – literally, a private set of laws or a ‘special deal’ worked out between the king and a certain group. Privileges could be **honorific**, such as the noble’s right to wear a sword in public. However, usually privileges entitled the owner to significant special treatment. Some were **legal concessions**; for example, nobles and priests were tried by special law courts made up of their own kind. The most significant concessions were **fiscal concessions**; for example, certain groups – nobles, clergy and rich people in towns – had negotiated with the French king to pay relatively little tax in proportion to their wealth.

**honorific** a certain type of privilege such as the noble’s right to wear a sword in public

**legal concessions** privileges relating to the law

**fiscal concessions** privileges relating to taxes

Nobody enjoyed equality of treatment in professional, legal or financial matters; your rights depended on the group to which you belonged and what privileges it had. Our modern concept of equality of all citizens did not exist; it would take a revolution to eliminate these privileges.

## 2.2 The culture of deference: Respect for your ‘betters’

This unequal corporate society was complemented by a culture of deference. This was not a legal but a social and psychological quality; people accepted that the rich and the powerful were superior, and instinctively paid respect to the privileged by changing the way they spoke and behaved in their presence.

French society was still structured upon an old-fashioned system of social classification known as the **estate**. Today, we usually use the word ‘class’, meaning

**estate (état)** a system of social classification by function: the clergy’s role was to pray (First Estate); the nobility’s role was to fight (Second Estate); and the commoners’ role was to grow food and provide soldiers for armies (Third Estate). Note that each estate was not just one social class, because it contained people ranging from the very poor to the very wealthy



people enjoying much the same wealth, education and way of life. The estate was a much larger category, based upon a definition of what role people were supposed to fulfil in society, according to a set of categories that had made sense in the Middle Ages, but were quite outdated by the 1780s.

### FOCUS QUESTIONS 2.1

- 1 What was privilege and what forms did it take?
- 2 What was the culture of deference and how might it have affected people in their everyday lives?

◀ **Source 2.1** *The Landlord’s Visit, 1750*. This engraving illustrates the social and psychological aspects of a culture of deference. Here, members of a farming family are being visited by their noble landlord. Apart from paying their rent, they show respect by their modest behaviour, including restrained gestures and downcast eyes.

## 2.3 The three estates

**peasants** these were members of the Third Estate who lived and worked in the country, and engaged in agricultural work; some were wealthy and some moderately well-to-do, but many were poor sharecroppers who did not own enough land to make a living and had to rent it from their local lord

In theory, France had three estates. The First Estate included all the clergy from wealthy bishops and archbishops down to humble priests. In the traditional social plan that had existed since the Middle Ages, the task of the clergy was to pray and to keep the kingdom free of evil influences. The Second Estate was made up of the nobility, ranging from the most powerful nobles to impoverished minor nobles. Their traditional role was to fight for the king, and to maintain sufficient equipment and soldiers to contribute a contingent to the nation's army in times of war. The Third Estate was defined negatively as everybody who did not belong to the first two estates. In medieval society, this meant primarily the **peasants**, whose task was to produce food for the remainder of society.

The supporting role of the Third Estate is described in Source 2.2, which vividly shows the three estates as three representative figures: the Third Estate (represented by the peasant in the centre) existed to 'carry' the first two estates.

In the years since this social system had been defined, the Third Estate had expanded to include the majority of the population: the vast number of people – **artisans** (skilled workers), shopkeepers, merchants, owners of land, lawyers, doctors, financiers, even some industrialists – who enjoyed far more wealth, education and influence than the earlier peasants had.

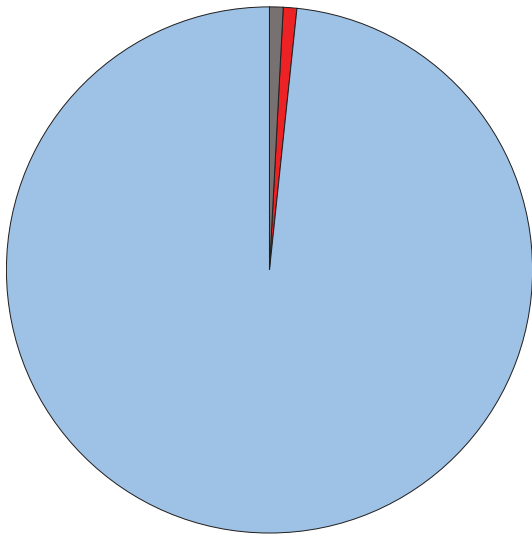
Modern readers often confuse these estates, assuming that the first two estates were 'the rich', while the Third Estate was 'the poor'. In fact, *each* estate included an enormous range of wealth, from the very poor to the very wealthy.

**artisans** workers who were trained and skilled in some trade, such as barrel-making or glass-making, and who worked in small workshops in cities, towns and villages



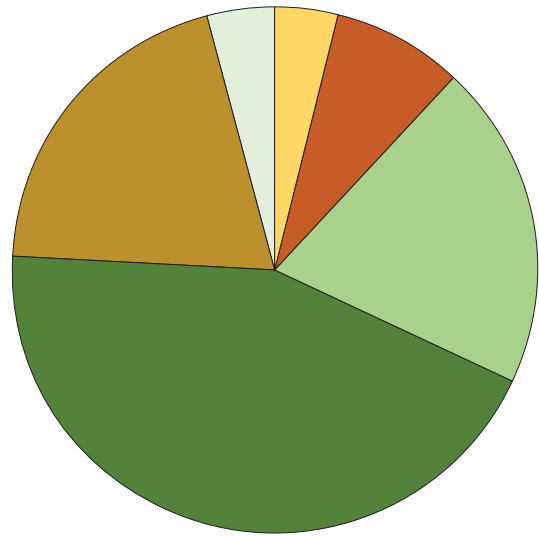
► **Source 2.2** *We must hope that this game will soon be over.* This engraving depicts the three estates, or main groups, in French society by means of three representative figures.

Composition of the three estates



- First Estate: 169 500 clergy (0.6% of population)
- Second Estate: 125 000 nobles (0.4% of population)
- Third Estate: Approximately 24–26 million people (c. 98% of population)

Composition of the Third Estate



- Bourgeoisie: 1 million
- Artisan workers: 2 million
- Landowning farmers and tenant farmers: 5 million
- Sharecropping farmers: 11 million
- Day labourers: 5 million
- Serfs: 1 million



Adapted and updated from J.M. Thompson, *The French Revolution*, 1964, p. 83.

▲ **Source 2.3** This diagram shows the different groups in French society in 1789 and their relative numerical importance. While these figures are approximate, they do indicate the extreme minority of the two privileged estates and the overwhelming majority of the Third Estate.

## The First Estate: The clergy

The First Estate, the clergy, were only 0.6 per cent of the population, yet the Catholic Church owned about 10 per cent of the land in France. The Church hierarchy constituted a small, privileged group of about 1000 high clergy, such as bishops and archbishops – all of them noble. It was almost impossible for a commoner to enter this hierarchy. They were fabulously wealthy; an archbishop might earn £450 000 yearly. The **lower clergy** included about 40 000 parish priests (*curés*) and another 18 000 assistants (*vicaires*); these humble priests

**lower clergy** parish priests and assistants, who earned only £750 yearly

earned only £750 (French pounds) yearly.



► **Source 2.4** Portrait of Christophe de Beaumont, who was Archbishop of Paris from 1746 to 1781



▲ Source 2.5 *The Mass of Canon Antoine de La Porte (The Altar of Notre Dame)* by Jean-Baptiste Jouvenet, c. 1709

**tithe** a tax of between 8 and 10 per cent of people's income or of the value of their crops and livestock, paid to the local Catholic priest

**don gratuit** the contribution of the Catholic Church to the French state; the Church had the privilege of calculating how much it would pay on each occasion

**corps** an organisation of military personnel

The Church was wealthy, enjoying a special right to apply the **tithe**, a tax of between 8 and 10 per cent of people's income or of the value of their crops and livestock. Every peasant in France paid this tax. The Church was also completely exempt from the royal taxes, paying only a voluntary donation (**don gratuit**) of 1 per cent of its income – about £3 million per year. Little of this wealth went to the parish priest, who could have used it to help the sick and the poor in his care.

## The Second Estate: The nobility

The Second Estate, the nobility, numbered only 0.4 per cent of the population, but had enormous wealth – they owned 30 per cent of the land and controlled most of the important public positions. The Second Estate also enjoyed tax exemptions, although they still paid certain taxes. They dominated the highest administrative posts in government and the Church; for example, in the army, navy and diplomatic **corps**, all senior officers were aristocrats who could demonstrate a lineage going back for generations.

The nobility included the older ‘nobility of the sword’ (*noblesse d’épée*) and the more recent ‘nobility of the robe’ (*noblesse de robe*). The nobles of the sword (the ‘old nobility’ or ‘upper nobility’) were families who traced their ancestry back centuries to some military achievement.

**noblesse d’épée** older ‘nobility of the sword’

**noblesse de robe** more recent ‘nobility of the robe’

The nobility of the robe was a more recent nobility of high civil servants, created only from the seventeenth century onwards. For this noble title, the king allowed wealthy people from the Third Estate to buy positions in the royal bureaucracy.



▲ **Source 2.6** A noble of the sword: François-Marie, First Duke of Broglie (1671–1745), as painted by Hyacinthe Rigaud



▲ **Source 2.7** Pierre Cardin Le Bret (*left*), President of the High Court of Aix and noble of the robe. His son, Cardin Le Bret (*right*), became president of the same *parlement*.

### FOCUS QUESTIONS 2.2

- 1 What were the two privileged estates?
- 2 What aspects of these two estates might have attracted criticism and resentment?

## The Third Estate: The commoners

The Third Estate was the largest and most complicated group of social classes. It included the great majority of the population, ranging from the poor, peasants, urban workers, artisans, shopkeepers, middle-class professionals, bourgeois landowners and financiers, to people who were virtually the millionaires of their age. Of a total population of 28 million people, some 22 million lived in the countryside. The remaining six million lived in towns and cities; most of these belonged to the working classes.



**KEY  
STATISTIC**

### The bourgeoisie

The towns were home to a wealthy group – about 2.75 million people – who owned substantial property, did not earn a living by working with their hands, and were educated and cultured. Some were nobles or priests, but most were rich members of the Third Estate referred to as the **bourgeoisie** (meaning the whole social group) or as a **bourgeois** (meaning the individual members). The two million bourgeois comprised about 10 per cent of the population, living mainly in the capital, Paris, and in large cities such as Lyon, Marseille, Bordeaux and Toulouse, as well as smaller market towns.

**bourgeoisie** people of the Third Estate who lived in towns, owned property and engaged in trade, industry or the professions

**bourgeois** the individual members of the bourgeoisie



▲ Source 2.8 Bourgeois fashion at the time of Louis XVI

### The bourgeoisie make their fortune

Many bourgeois families had made their fortune in the commercial and industrial expansion of the eighteenth century, often starting in small businesses such as shops. By the 1780s, most of France's commercial capital, and much of its industry, was in bourgeois hands, although certain industries – such as metallurgy – also involved some nobles. The ports, in particular, were the centres of this merchant bourgeoisie. As soon as a bourgeois family had consolidated its fortune, it began to move away from its commercial origins and to invest its money in other forms of wealth.

Was there an industrial, or capitalist, bourgeoisie in France? Not strictly speaking, because the bourgeoisie in the 1780s lived before the development of large-scale industry in France, so most were not capitalists in the modern sense of running large factories. The French economy remained one of small workshops, although it had begun to develop some larger factories, such as the iron works of Le Creusot.

▼ Source 2.9 The Royal Foundry of Le Creusot, 1787





The greatest aim of the bourgeois was to become noble. Their main activity was investment in land and in finance, allowing them to become *rentiers*, living completely from investments like a noble (*vivre noblement*). In the liberal professions, the successful bourgeois could hope to purchase **venal public office**, a position in the royal administration costing from £50 000 to £500 000. During the eighteenth century, some 5000–7000 bourgeois entered the nobility of the robe. By the 1780s, merchants, industrialists and bankers were in a bidding frenzy for these positions, increasing prices and dashing the hopes of many ambitious bourgeois.

**vivre noblement** living off investments like a noble

**venal public office** the legal purchase of public office, often with a noble title attached, by wealthy and ambitious bourgeois who wanted to rise into the Second Estate

### Working people in cities

The Third Estate also included all the working people of France. About two million people worked in cities and towns in artisan trades and the few existing industries. Many artisans were highly skilled and some owned valuable tools – even workshops. The word ‘worker’ (*ouvrier*) meant a wage-earner, a labourer, a self-employed skilled craftsman and even the master-owner of a workshop. There were about 500 000 workers in Paris; many could read and were intelligently interested in radical ideas.



▲ Source 2.10 *Wetter Brothers textile factory in Orange in 1764* by Joseph Gabriel Rossetti. This women's workshop manufactured Indian fabric.

## The peasants

Many peasants had to rent extra land from noble, Church or bourgeois landowners, at a very high cost. In addition, peasants were subjected to the crushing weight of extra payments, including the tithe to the Church and a range of **feudal dues** to the nobles.

**feudal dues** extra payments of money, food or labour to the nobles

**feudal system** medieval political and economic system

A typical poor farmer like the one shown in Source 2.11 lived and worked in a very small community deep in the countryside of France. Typically, he might own a small patch of land, but often this was not big enough to provide all the food he needed. He would be forced to rent more land from the local lord, who would make him sign an exploitative sharecropping contract. Such a peasant paid taxes to the king, dues to the local lord and a tithe to the Church.

### FOCUS QUESTIONS 2.3

- 1 Which social groups were included in the Third Estate?
- 2 Why do you think the **feudal system**, as applied to peasants, ceased to be appropriate by the eighteenth century?



► Source 2.11 A farmer from the Third Estate

### AMAZING BUT TRUE ...

While peasants struggled to grow enough food to survive, the royal family at Versailles was sitting down to 11-course feasts. However, Marie-Antoinette's infamous comment about hungry workers ("Let them eat cake, then!") was never actually said by her; the line was taken from an imaginary character in a play. Indeed, Marie-Antoinette showed extreme sympathy for the poor and had to be taught to control her generosity; she often gave her purse of gold coins to any beggar.

## ANALYSIS ACTIVITY 2.1: IMAGE DOCUMENT STUDY



## The feudal system



▲ **Source 2.12** This coloured engraving by Jacques Lagniet shows the contrast between the rich noble lord on the left and the poor peasant on the right. The left-hand caption reads: 'The noble is the spider and the peasant is the fly'. Over the huge bag of wheat being paid is the caption: 'The more the Devil has, the more he wants'. Above the hungry peasant, the caption reads: 'This poor man brings him everything, wheat, fruit, money; this fat lord is seated, ready to receive everything, and does not show any kindness or mercy to him'.

- 1 What does the caption 'The noble is the spider and the peasant is the fly' refer to in the old regime of France?
- 2 What were the goods and services that the sharecropping peasant had to pay the landlord?
- 3 How is the culture of deference expressed by the attitude and posture of the figures in this image?
- 4 What were some of the invisible obligations that were built into the landscape of rural France and are not shown here?

## The attack on feudalism

While peasants had always resented paying the many, heavy feudal dues – especially during times of bad harvests and food shortages – the real attack on the feudal system began in the eighteenth century, when educated people started to believe that the dues were too heavy. In particular, a number of liberally minded nobles, who actually received feudal dues from their peasants, began to lose faith in this system. For example, the nobles of the Breton Club supported the view that the feudal system was unfair and should be abolished. They campaigned for the abolition and, on the night of 4 August in 1789, first gave up their own feudal dues voluntarily. They then persuaded the National Assembly (a legislative body that was formed in 1789) to abolish feudal dues entirely. For more on this, see Chapters 7 and 8.



▲ Source 2.13 *Peasant Family in an Interior*, Louis Le Nain, c. 1643

### THE STORY SO FAR

The social order in France had been relatively stable for some centuries, because people accepted the idea of a corporate society, in which it was normal for some people to have special rights that others did not enjoy. There was general acceptance that the role of the First Estate was to protect the French nation spiritually, by praying and defending it from the Devil. The role of the Second Estate was to defend the nation militarily, by fighting foreign enemies. The Third Estate humbly accepted its lesser role as ‘the common people’, whose role it was to simply grow food and to make goods.

These social differences were not just a matter of titles or prestige; for the privileged estates, there were enormous benefits in terms of special legal treatment and in exemption from some taxes. So long as these distinctions were generally accepted, the social order would hold. However, as we shall see, the eighteenth century was characterised by a new questioning spirit, which would criticise the privileges of the First and Second Estates, and would make new claims for the true importance of the Third Estate.

Use the QR code or visit the Interactive Textbook and watch the video summarising the chapter.



## Develop your historical-thinking skills

### Define key terms

Write your own definition of each of the following key terms:

- corporate society
- fiscal (tax) privilege
- First Estate
- Second Estate
- Third Estate.

### Establishing historical significance

- 1 In what ways was the old regime a corporate society? How does this sort of society differ from a modern democracy?
- 2 If land was the most basic form of wealth in the old regime, why was the distribution of land ownership in France bound to create serious tensions?
- 3 Would it be true to say that, in the old regime, the two privileged estates represented 'the rich' and the Third Estate represented 'the poor'?

### Using historical terms meaningfully

Write an extended paragraph explaining why the social system in France was causing tensions and new demands by the end of the eighteenth century. Use the following terms to show you understand their meaning and context:

- estates
- honorific privilege
- culture of deference
- legal privilege.

### Constructing historical arguments

'Although people tend to accept the social system in which they live, the old regime in France contained inequalities which, sooner or later, had to cause conflict'. To what extent do you agree with this statement?



# 3

## **SIGNIFICANT IDEAS: THE INFLUENCE OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT**

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*The writers of the Enlightenment ... were clearly not responsible for the revolutionary situation that developed in 1789, but they did dictate the terms in which educated people thought about society.*

– NORMAN HAMPSON, 1975

## Overview

Historian Norman Hampson argues that grievances only become revolution when radical ideas are present. These ideas make people aware of and vocal about their grievances and suggest how society could be improved by reform (slow, peaceful change) or by revolution (sudden, violent change).

In France, the evidence for the power of radical ideas seems strong. Throughout the eighteenth century, the **Enlightenment** thinkers criticised the absolute monarchy, the Catholic Church and the nobility. For many thinkers – then and now – this concentrated criticism of the old regime really caused its final crisis.

Still, there are weaknesses in this theory of ideas. Enlightenment ideas, though critical of the old regime, never joined into one theory and usually suggested reform rather than revolution. This chapter explores what these Enlightenment ideas were and how much influence they truly had in causing revolution.

**Enlightenment**  
a Europe-wide intellectual movement in the eighteenth century that criticised absolute monarchy and despotism, and attacked organised religion and its tendency towards intolerance



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## Key issues

- What were the ideas that played a significant role in challenging the existing order?
- How did the criticism of absolute royal power and privilege challenge the existing order?
- How did criticism of the Catholic Church further challenge the regime?
- How did claims to popular sovereignty and equality challenge the government?
- Did the Enlightenment help to create a revolutionary situation in France?

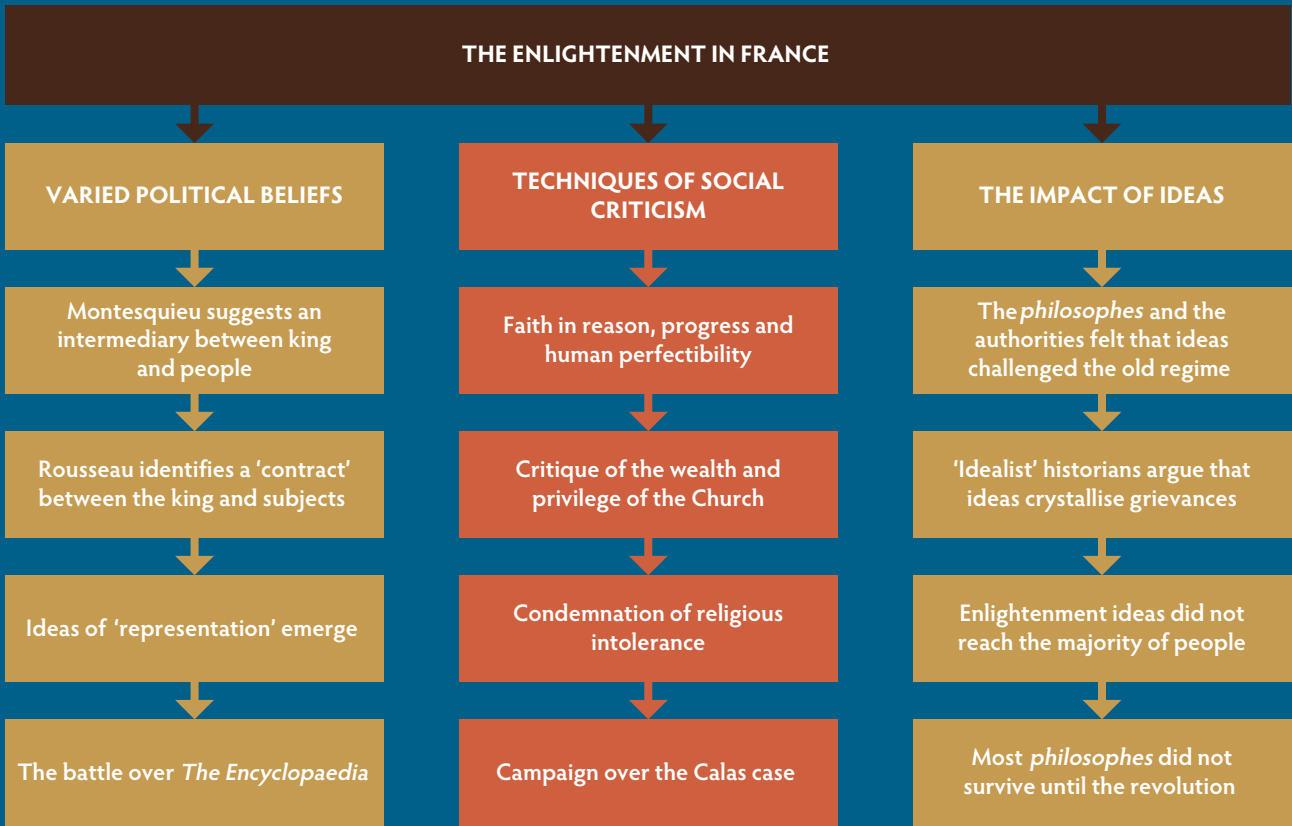
## Digital resources for this chapter

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-  video and audio sources and questions
-  digital activities.

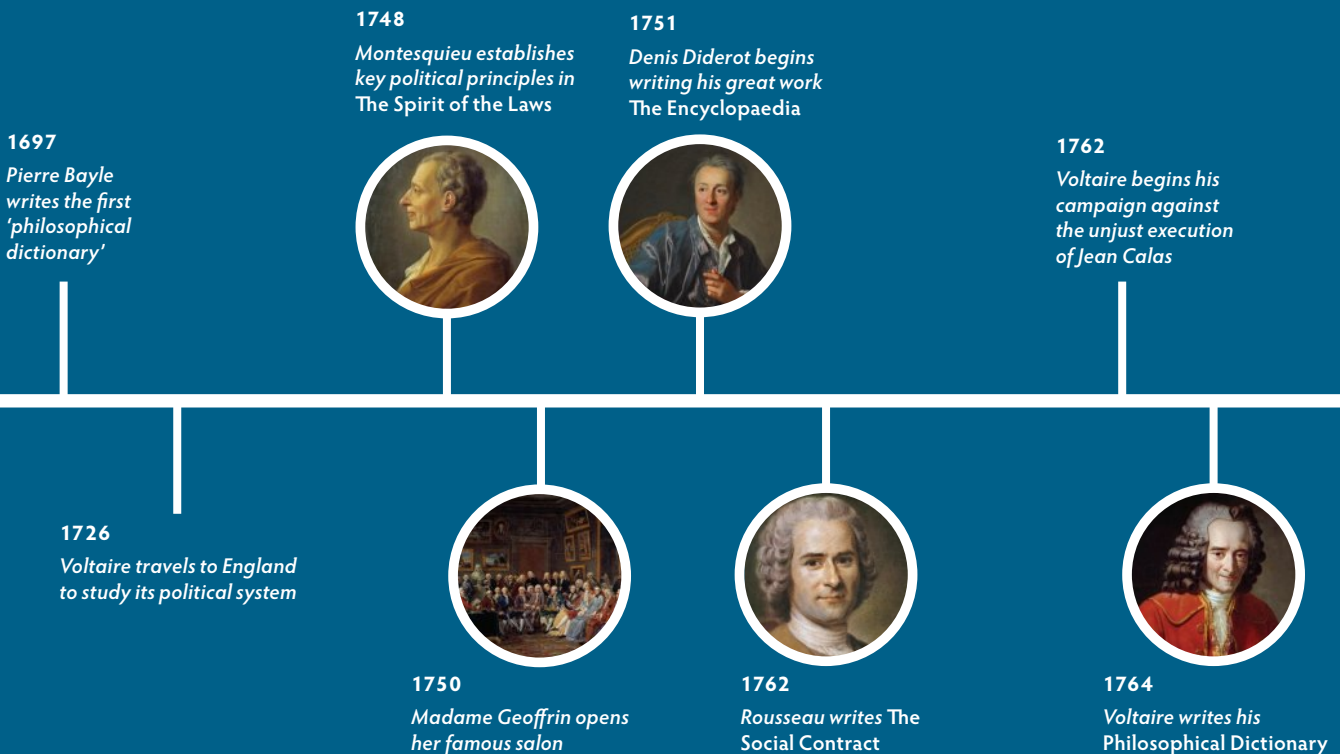
◀ **Source 3.0** *The Supper of the Philosophers*, Jean Huber, c. 1772–3. Included in the painting are Voltaire, Condorcet, Diderot and d’Alembert, among others

# Flow of chapter



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# Chapter timeline





## 3.1 Did the Enlightenment help create a revolutionary situation in France?

Traditionally, the most popular explanation for the revolution was that it was caused by changes in public thinking created by the intellectual movement known as the Enlightenment. This was a Europe-wide movement, powerfully expressed in the works of French writers such as Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot, Condorcet and Rousseau. Their ideas were varied, but generally emphasised using science, progress and reason to create a more humane world.

**philosophie** the system of ideas, emphasising science, progress and reason to create a more humane world, practised during the Enlightenment

These writers referred to their system of ideas based on reason as *philosophie*, and became known as *philosophes*. We leave this latter word in French because it does not translate meaningfully as ‘philosopher’; more accurately, the *philosophes* were critical thinkers. They saw themselves as ‘anti-philosophers’ because they rejected the abstract systems of thought of earlier philosophers, preferring to use reason to solve the practical problems facing humans. The *philosophes* thought it possible to use human reason and science to examine contemporary society, identify its injustices and inequalities, and suggest a more enlightened way of organising human life.

Traditionally, historians believed that the *philosophes*, in criticising the old regime, somehow caused the French Revolution. The evidence is suggestive: from the 1720s onwards, these thinkers criticised the old regime, which became unstable in the 1780s and collapsed in 1789. Could this be the main cause of the monarchy’s crisis?

This idea dates back to the Enlightenment itself. The *philosophes* themselves believed their ideas were powerful. Denis Diderot claimed that their attack on the Catholic Church’s authority seriously weakened the old regime. The *philosophes*’ many enemies also blamed the critical spirit of the Enlightenment for destroying authority. English writer Edmund Burke believed that the *philosophes* undermined the monarchy and caused the revolution. Finally, the revolutionaries of 1789 later claimed to have been inspired by Enlightenment ideas, apparently confirming Diderot’s belief in the **subversive** power of ideas. Very few of the *philosophes* were still alive by the 1780s, but their ideas were adopted by later revolutionaries to justify their reforms.

**subversive** designed to overthrow a government or other institution

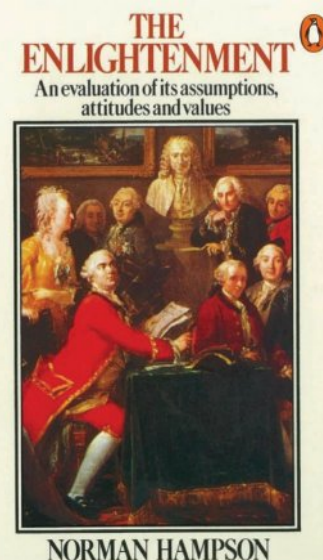
**ferment** agitation or excitement due to changing conditions

### KEY HISTORIAN

#### Norman Hampson (1922–2011)

Historians like Hampson believe that the Enlightenment was the main cause of the revolution; the authority of Louis XIV was based on a certain unquestionability, which was steadily weakened during the eighteenth century, allowing people to question the political and social structures of the old regime. We must consider this argument seriously. There were material problems in the 1780s – bad harvests, rapidly rising prices of staple foods such as bread, and increasing poverty and unemployment – but these had occurred previously without causing revolution. What was new in 1789? For Hampson, the new element was the intellectual **ferment**, the sense of growing criticism and dissatisfaction, and opposition to the existing government.

► Source 3.1 *The Enlightenment: An evaluation of its assumptions, attitudes and values* by Norman Hampson



## 3.2 How did ideas from the Enlightenment challenge the existing order?

### Teaching techniques of social criticism

The true radical effect of the Enlightenment was not its political agenda, but the creation of a general questioning spirit; a 'toolkit of ideas' that was turned critically on contemporary society. The Enlightenment taught people that nothing should be unquestionable. It also taught them *how* to question. To contemporaries, this perspective was breathtakingly bold.

### The role of women in the Enlightenment

**salon** intellectual gathering of high society in private mansions

The Enlightenment was much more than the famous books we still study today. It was an exciting conversation between educated and thoughtful people across Europe. Women took a leading role in guiding this conversation. The main place for this discussion was the **salon**, meaning a formal social gathering in the home of a

wealthy noble or bourgeois woman. One of the greatest intellectual hostesses was Madame Marie-Thérèse Geoffrin (1699–1777), who opened her salon in 1750 and dominated Parisian intellectual circles for nearly 30 years. Even more than the printing press, these refined conversations were the main way Enlightenment ideas spread and inspired brilliant minds across Europe.



▲ **Source 3.2** This painting shows an important site where Enlightenment discussion took place: a salon. A salon was a social gathering in the home of a wealthy noble or bourgeois woman, such as Madame Geoffrin.

### Teaching faith in progress and human perfectibility

The second liberating effect of the Enlightenment was to give people the optimism and confidence to believe that human society could be improved. Thoughtful people sincerely believed they could improve society by using reason, science and humanity to prevent human suffering and misery.

### 3.3 How did criticism of the Catholic Church challenge the existing order?

The closest thing the *philosophes* had to a common criticism of their society concerned the Catholic Church. They attacked the Church's inequalities, especially the upper clergy's extreme wealth and laziness. Less justifiably, they criticised the allegedly idle lives of the regular clergy. This was unfair to the poor parish priests, and the many monks and nuns who fulfilled valuable social roles, such as providing charity for the poor. The *philosophes* also attacked the idea of original sin, claiming that humanity could not be affected by Adam and Eve's sin. They believed that people were not born evil, but rather become good or evil, depending on how they were treated. In addition, they rejected **religious orthodoxy**, which is the idea that one religion can be declared 'right' and all other religions 'wrong'. The *philosophes* condemned religious intolerance, and particularly criticised the fact that Protestants and Jews were not allowed to register their births with the Catholic Church, and so could not be employed by the state.

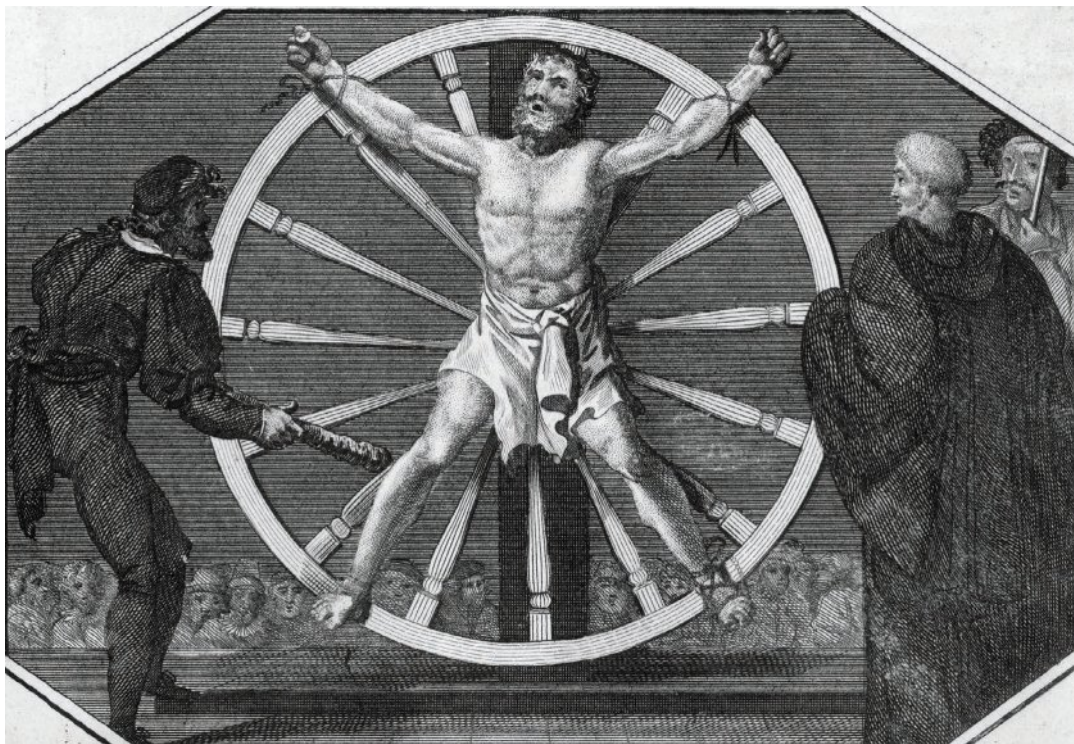
**religious orthodoxy** the idea that one religion can be declared right and all other religions wrong

Occasionally, the *philosophes* took up causes more directly – as, for example, when Voltaire defended the cause of Jean Calas, a Protestant who had been wrongfully executed in 1762 for the alleged murder of his suicidal son. Voltaire secured posthumous justice for Calas in 1765, creating great public sympathy for the impoverished family, and increased awareness of both the religious intolerance and injustice of the old regime.

#### FOCUS QUESTIONS 3.1

- 1 Although the *philosophes* did not aim to overthrow the old regime, they taught three beliefs that would have radical effects. What were the key strands of Enlightenment thought?
- 2 Why would Voltaire's victory in the Calas case have shaken public confidence in the old regime?
- 3 Why did the attack on the Catholic Church prove to be such a serious challenge to the existing order?

▼ **Source 3.3** This engraving shows the cruel death of the Protestant Jean Calas, who was 'broken on the wheel' (tortured to death) for allegedly murdering his son. Voltaire proved that this was a tragic case of pure religious intolerance.



### 3.4 How did the criticism of absolute royal power challenge the existing order?

The *philosophes* never shared a united political ideology. Most were not primarily political thinkers. They cannot have conspired towards a political revolution because they agreed on almost nothing. They attacked divine monarchy and called it tyranny, but they did not suggest even a constitutional monarchy or a republic. Many accepted ‘enlightened despotism’, in which the all-powerful king is advised by intelligent people – preferably the *philosophes* themselves. Voltaire advised Frederick II of Prussia, hoping to make him an ‘enlightened’ monarch.



The growing criticism of the monarchy was expressed in a number of forms, such as rumours and scandals and also pornographic books and images mocking important figures, such as the king and the queen (See chapter 17 for more detail).

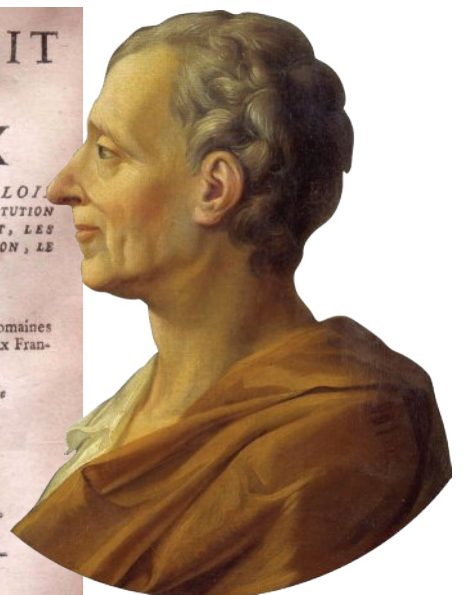
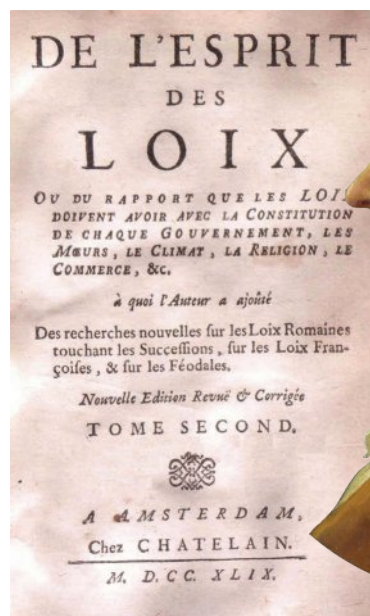
◀ Source 3.4 Voltaire ‘enlightening’ Frederick II

#### Montesquieu’s political theories challenge royal absolute power

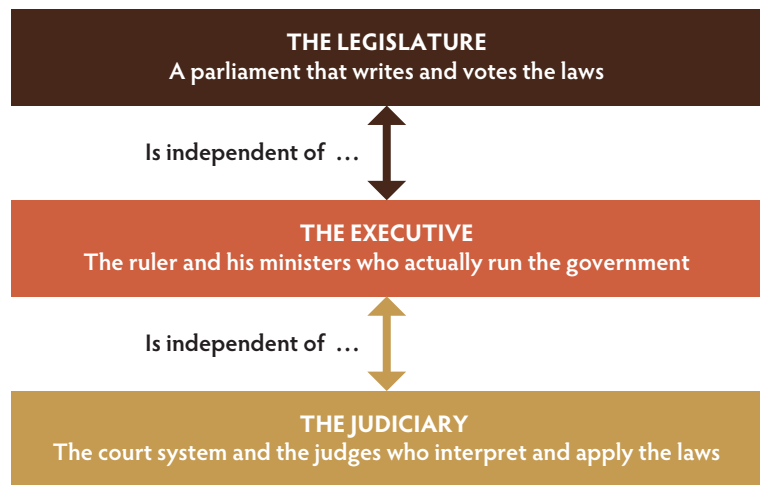
Montesquieu, a member of one of France’s great noble families, suggested in *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748) that France should have a constitution and that civil liberties should be guaranteed to ensure that everybody had personal security. He insisted that, if a monarchy’s power was not controlled by a set of good laws, it would quickly become ‘despotic’. Montesquieu demanded that people be guaranteed freedom to think as they wished, to speak and to meet freely in assembly. He also demanded an end to slavery.

Montesquieu explained the central principle that the three arms of government – the legislature

► Source 3.5 Montesquieu, a member of the *parlement* and one of the most important supporters of political principles (such as the separation of powers), with his most important work of political theory, *The Spirit of the Laws*



(parliament), the executive (ministerial government) and the judiciary (the legal system) – should be totally separate and independent of each other. It was especially important that the legal system be free of any influence by the ruler, so that the king could not simply instruct the judges to find a person guilty. This would ensure that the laws were applied equally and fairly. Montesquieu believed that, in a free and democratic republic, people would put the government’s interests ahead of their own because they would be able to see that the regime brought them liberty.



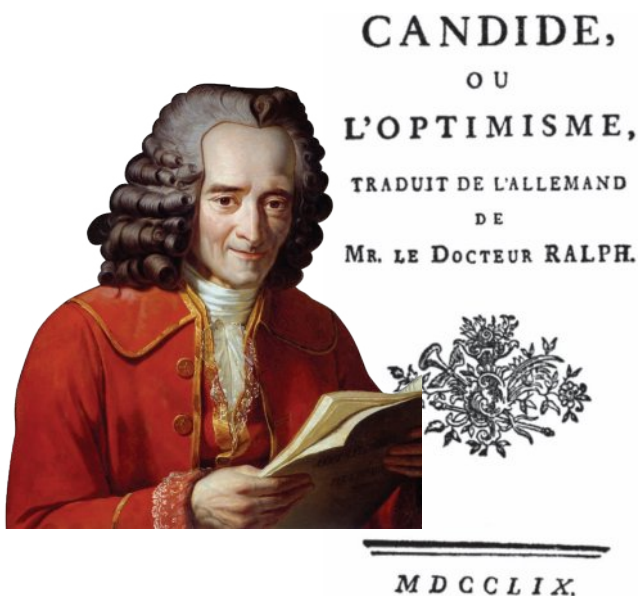
### Voltaire recommends a parliament and popular sovereignty

Voltaire taught his contemporaries to think independently and critically about the society in which they lived. He had learned from hard experience the truth of his own saying: ‘It is very dangerous to be right when those in power are wrong’. Due to being too bold, he had suffered imprisonment in Paris and had then gone to live in England from 1726 until 1729. There, he admired England’s parliament, and its obvious respect for literary and scientific thinkers. He realised that he did not have to criticise France directly; he just had to praise England for its liberties and his readers would understand that France did not have the same qualities. Voltaire had learned ‘unspoken criticism’ or criticism by implication. For example, in Letter 9, ‘On Government’, he never mentions France when he praises England’s fairer taxation system:

*A man is by no means exempt from paying certain taxes here just because he is a noble or because he is a priest ... When [a tax bill] is confirmed by the Lords and approved by the King, then everybody pays. Everyone gives, not according to his rank (which is absurd) but according to his income ... The tax always remains the same, although income from land has risen, so nobody is downtrodden and nobody complains.*

**Source 3.6** Cited from Leonard Tancock (trans.), Voltaire, *Letters on England*, 1884, p. 50

Voltaire’s readers clearly understood the contrast with France, where the nobles and clergy did enjoy exemption from some taxes, and paid relatively little in proportion to their great wealth.



Voltaire made his contemporaries think; he caused them to question what they accepted as normal. For example, they would have enjoyed sitting in a comfortable mansion, drinking tea, coffee or hot chocolate, and enjoying elegant conversation, as we see in Charpentier’s painting *The Cup of Hot Chocolate* (Source 3.8). However, Voltaire asked, ‘But where does the sugar come from?’ He answered it in a story called *Candide*, in which the young hero travels the world, and sees much misery and injustice. He visits a colony where slaves are used to harvest sugar, and is shocked to see a poor man who had been punished by having his hand and foot cut off for some minor crime.

◀ **Source 3.7** Voltaire and his popular satirical work, *Candide* (*The Optimist*)

Through his central character, Candide, Voltaire warns his contemporaries that it is at this inhumane price that they have sugar in their coffee in Paris. This is the beginning of the kind of critical thought about exploitation that still concerns us today; for example, when we buy clothing and check that it has not been made by modern slave labour.



▲ **Source 3.8** Wealthy Parisians enjoying elegant conversation and cups of hot chocolate. Few of them would have thought to ask where their sugar came from. *The Cup of Hot Chocolate* was painted by Jean-Baptiste Charpentier in 1768 and is also known as *The Penthièvre Family*.

► **Source 3.9** In contrast to *The Cup of Hot Chocolate*, Moreau's illustration shows the moment when Voltaire's hero, Candide, visits a sugar plantation and observes the extreme treatment of slaves. The caption is a comment by the slave: 'This is the price at which you eat sugar in Europe'.



## Rousseau's theory of popular sovereignty

Another important thinker was Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose book *The Social Contract* (1762) explained the key idea that there is a contract (agreement) between a ruling king and his people: they have a duty to obey him, but he has a duty to look after their welfare. Once this mutual agreement is broken, the obligation of people to their ruler ceases. A king is not put on his throne by God; instead, real sovereignty – the source of all political power – comes from below, from the whole mass of citizens, and they are the ones who should make the laws. It is proper for the king to lead the executive part of government, but only the people can make good and meaningful laws through representative bodies such as parliaments. Rousseau wrote:

*What, then, is the government? An intermediary body established between the subjects and the sovereign for their mutual communication, a body charged with the execution of the laws and the maintenance of freedom, both civil and political.*

### FOCUS QUESTIONS 3.2

- 1 What were some of the key political theories of the *philosophes*?
- 2 Why did theories of popular sovereignty seriously challenge the existing order?
- 3 Why is it not possible to say that the *philosophes* formed an early political group or revolutionary conspiracy?

► **Source 3.10** Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his book *The Social Contract*, which would become the 'bible' of the French Revolution after 1789

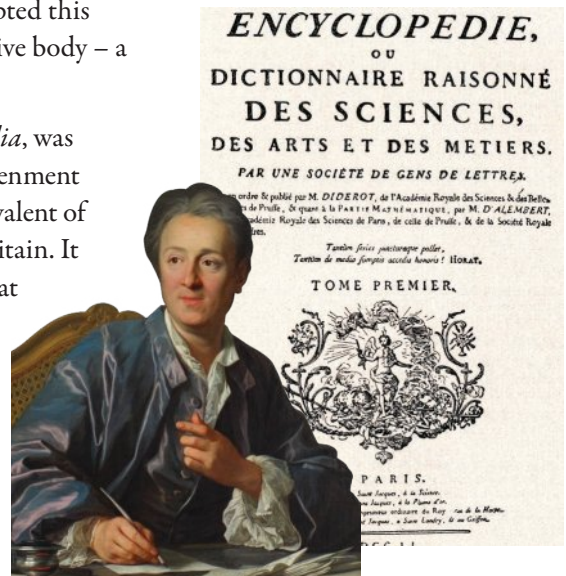


## The key idea of representation: Diderot and d'Holbach

The most important Enlightenment political idea was **representation**. Simply put, this means that people cannot be expected to obey laws for which they have not voted. For example, European kings could order new taxes to pay for a war, and nobody had a chance to vote on the issue. However, in the 1760s and 1770s, the American colonists opposed the mighty superpower of Great Britain on the principle of 'No taxation without representation' and won their case. French thinkers quickly adopted this idea and wrote passionately about the need to have a representative body – a parliament – that could vote on new taxes.

One of the greatest works of the Enlightenment, *The Encyclopaedia*, was invented almost by accident. A publisher approached the Enlightenment thinker, Denis Diderot, to ask him to simply write a French equivalent of the first encyclopaedia that had been published successfully in Britain. It was meant to be an encyclopaedia in the sense we know today; that is, a simple list of factual knowledge about specific subjects. Diderot accepted the task, but quickly realised that he could use his 'factual' articles to subtly express radical ideas. For example, he and his assistant d'Holbach wrote an apparently innocent article on China, but used it to criticise the idea of one man – the emperor – ruling over millions of people without ever consulting with them. Diderot had not even mentioned Louis XVI or France, but everybody understood that he was criticising the absolute monarchy. Yet, since Louis XVI was never named, the police could not take any action against the author!

**representation** the political idea that people cannot be expected to obey laws for which they have not voted



▲ Source 3.11 Denis Diderot, one of the most brilliant and varied minds of the Enlightenment, with *The Encyclopaedia*, which was published from 1751–72

### ANALYSIS ACTIVITY 3.1: READING A PRIMARY SOURCE

#### An article on politics from Diderot's *The Encyclopaedia*

Below is an entry by Baron D'Holbach on representatives in *The Encyclopaedia*.

*REPRESENTATIVES: The representatives of a nation are elected citizens ... who are charged by society to speak in its name, to state its interests, to prevent oppression and to join in the process of governing. In a despotic state, the head of government is everything, the nation is nothing. The will of just one man becomes the law, and society is not represented. This is the form of government in Asia, whose people, subjected for centuries to traditional slavery, have not invented any way to influence the enormous power that constantly crushes them. In an absolute monarchy, the king either has the right to be the sole representative of the nation by the consent of his people, or by taking this right against their will. The king then speaks for all his people; the laws he makes are supposed to reflect the will of the entire people whom he represents. The French nation used to be represented by the Assembly of the Estates-General of the kingdom, composed of clergy and nobility, to whom the Third Estate was later added, so that it could represent the common people. This national assembly has not met since the year 1628.*

Source 3.12 Adapted from Stephen Gendzier's translation of Denis Diderot, *The Encyclopaedia. Selections*, 1967, pp. 214–15

- 1 In the form of an encyclopaedia entry, comments such as this can be presented as general knowledge, referring to political theory in the most general terms. How might this technique have helped the *philosophes* to make some of their more dangerous criticisms?
- 2 How does d'Holbach define a despotic state? Why does he give an example drawn from Asia?
- 3 Why is d'Holbach's 'factual' statement about the last meeting of the Estates-General actually a serious criticism of the French monarchy?

## The battle over *The Encyclopaedia* from 1752 to 1759

Why did the royal government prove to be unable or unwilling to respond to new ideas? The old regime struggled to deal with critical viewpoints, many of which were summed up in *The Encyclopaedia*, which was published from 1751 to 1772. The editors, Diderot and d'Alembert, used the format of the encyclopaedia to bring together 71 818 articles containing unprecedented information on such things as industries and trades.

**seditions** involving rebellion against a government or other authority

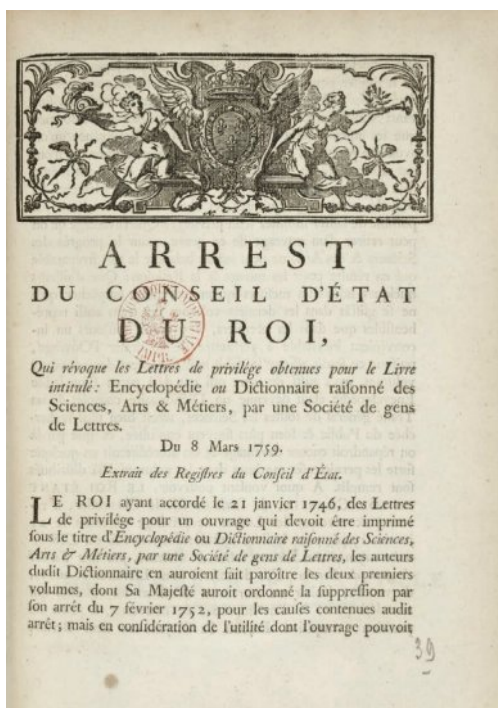
Historian Frank Kafkaer reminds us that Diderot and d'Alembert also published **seditions** articles criticising absolute monarchy, mocking the Catholic religion,

and proposing the separation of church and state, although the various writers they published did not completely agree on points. Some emphasised that merchants were useful, productive citizens who deserved to hold political power; other articles, such as 'Tragic bourgeois', blamed wealthy bourgeois for wasting their money by purchasing nobility. There is a general sympathy for the condition of working people, but little sense yet of democracy for all citizens. Never before, argue Kafkaer and Laux, had one encyclopaedia suggested so many political, economic and religious reforms, and 'helped undermine the church and the monarchy and thus unintentionally prepared the way for the French Revolution'.



▲ Source 3.13 Baron d'Holbach held a salon in Paris that was regularly attended by *philosophes*, including Rousseau and Diderot.

Louis XV and the Church clearly saw the threat to authority. They responded first by censoring the work, then ordering publication to cease for some months in 1752. By 1757, official interference was so severe that d'Alembert resigned as editor. In 1759, the government banned the publication altogether. The work was nonetheless very popular, selling 4000 copies in the first edition and 20 000 in later editions.



### FOCUS QUESTIONS 3.3

- 1 How could a simple encyclopaedia be transformed into an instrument of political criticism of the old regime?
- 2 How is d'Holbach's definition of the word 'representatives' an attack on the old regime?

◀ Source 3.14 This document dated 8 March 1759 explains that the king had come to feel that the authors of *The Encyclopaedia* were abusing their privilege to write scandalous and dangerous ideas, so the publication is to be stopped.



## 3.4 Analysing the impact of the Enlightenment

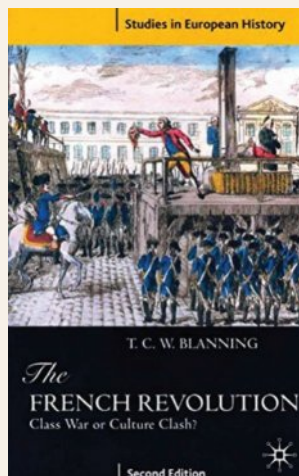
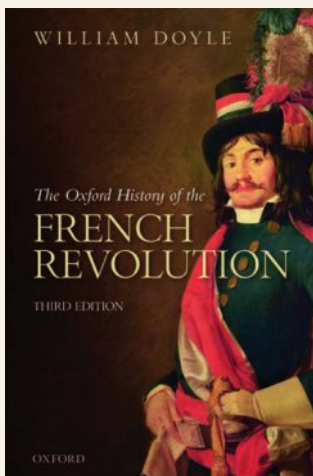
### Did the *philosophes* suggest revolution or just reform?

#### KEY HISTORIAN



#### William Doyle (1942–) and Timothy Blanning (1942–)

William Doyle has wondered if the French Revolution would have happened anyway, even if the *philosophes* had not written anything. His argument is that the *philosophes* were not revolutionary, but often quite



conservative and very few of their ideas suggested the massive changes made later during the revolution.

Fellow historian Timothy Blanning believes that the Enlightenment did not oppose the old regime itself, only its abuses. Moreover, by the 1780s, many leading *philosophes* were dead and those who remained were safely integrated into the old regime.

◀ **Source 3.15** Left: *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* by William Doyle (2018). Right: *The French Revolution: Class War or Culture Clash?* by Timothy Blanning (1998).

### Did Enlightenment ideas reach all types of people?

Finally, we cannot assume that ideas, however powerful, spread throughout society to everybody. The readers of the *philosophes* were a small, fashionable social elite of nobles and bourgeois. Few Enlightenment ideas reached the vast majority of peasants in the countryside, who still managed to formulate radical thoughts and undertake revolutionary action without ever having read a word written by the *philosophes*. Clearly, ideas can contribute to a revolutionary mentality, but a revolutionary mentality can also develop where radical ideas have not spread.

#### ANALYSIS ACTIVITY 3.2: READING A PRIMARY SOURCE



#### A royal official evaluates the Enlightenment

An extract from the private journal of the Marquis d'Argenson:

*A philosophical wind is blowing towards us from England, a plea for free, anti-monarchical rule; it streams into people's heads and everyone realises how popular opinion conditions existence. Perhaps this new regime is already established in the general mind, to be put into practise at the very first opportunity and the revolution might break out more peaceably than we imagine. All social orders share common discontent, a riot could become a revolt, and the revolt total revolution.*

**Source 3.16** From Peter Vansittart, *Voices of the French Revolution*, 1989, p. 38

- 1 In terms of the debate about the importance of the Enlightenment, how does this royal official evaluate the power of radical ideas?
- 2 How does he see the situation in France in the decades before the revolution?

ANALYSIS ACTIVITY 3.3: READING A PRIMARY SOURCE



Look at the image in Source 3.17, then answer the questions that follow.



▲ Source 3.17 *Mirabeau Admires Thinkers of the Enlightenment* (Benjamin Franklin, Montesquieu, Rousseau and Fénelon), c. 1789. This political image was published in France in the 1780s. The caption on the flag reads 'France is free'.

- 1 What is the image in Source 3.17 suggesting about the role of ideas in forming revolutionary leaders and helping to create a revolutionary situation?
- 2 Using a historical dictionary, try to find out why the seventeenth-century French writer Fénelon is included among these important figures of the Enlightenment.
- 3 Why was the American *philosophe* and statesman Benjamin Franklin included in this line-up of important people?
- 4 To what extent did the ideas of the European Enlightenment and the American Revolution really contribute to the French Revolution?

THE STORY SO FAR



The intellectual movement of the Enlightenment began in the 1720s and reached its peak by the 1770s. Many of the main *philosophes* were dead by the 1780s. However, the men and women of 1789 had read the great Enlightenment works, and had learned how to think critically about their own society. They had also gained the confidence and optimism to believe that it was possible to create a better world, and that human reason would allow them to do so.

The writers of the Enlightenment had criticised the old regime, but had not suggested its overthrow. Their suggestions were mainly about reform rather than revolution. Nevertheless, when those in a later generation conceived ideas of revolutionary change, they would refer to Enlightenment ideas for authority and guidance.

Use the QR code or visit the Interactive Textbook and watch the video summarising the chapter.



## Develop your historical-thinking skills

### Establishing historical significance

- 1 What were the main political ideas expressed in Rousseau's *The Social Contract*?
- 2 Is it true to say that Diderot's encyclopaedia was a serious attack on the institutions of the old regime?
- 3 In what way did Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws* suggest a change to the system of absolute royal power?

### Using historical terms meaningfully

Write an extended paragraph explaining why new political and social ideas of the Enlightenment in France were causing tensions and new demands by the end of the eighteenth century. Use the following terms to show you understand their meaning and context:

- Enlightenment
- *philosophe*
- encyclopaedia
- representation
- reason
- religious orthodoxy.

### Constructing historical arguments

Describe the nature of the Enlightenment's criticism of the old regime and evaluate the degree to which these criticisms might have caused the crisis of 1789.

### Analysing historian's interpretations

#### Alison Patrick

Professor Alison Patrick was one of Australia's most eminent scholars of French history and a pioneer of French revolutionary studies at the University of Melbourne.

As a historian, she accepted the argument that, while the Enlightenment did question the old regime, it did not directly cause the French Revolution. She later re-examined the question and asked what exactly the Enlightenment *did* contribute to the revolution. She concluded:

*[When] in 1789 the National Assembly got to work on its program of reform, the debates were conducted within an accepted framework of political ideas. For example, there was no serious support of divine-right monarchy. There was no argument over whether or not the legislature should be elected; the question was who should have the vote. No one defended the relics of personal serfdom in France or the chaos of the old judicial system; freedom of speech, freedom of the press, religious toleration were all taken for granted by most deputies... The philosophes had formulated the ideas which were taken for granted by the revolutionaries of 1789; and in this sense it can be said that the revolution was indeed their work.*



▲ Source 3.18 Alison Patrick

Source 3.19 From 'The Philosophes and the French Revolution', *Agora*, July 1966, p. 3

- 1 What, according to Alison Patrick, were the political and social ideas that the patriots of 1789 accepted almost as 'common sense'?
- 2 Why do you think that the existence of a body of generally accepted ideas might have assisted the process of decision-making and reform during the first stage of the revolution?

A painting depicting three men in 18th-century attire shaking hands in front of a classical building. The man on the left wears a white coat with red lapels and a black bicorne hat. The man in the center is in profile, wearing a dark coat and a black cap. The man on the right wears a red coat with white lapels and a black bicorne hat. The background shows a classical building with a column and a tree.

# 4 HOW DID RADICAL IDEAS MOBILISE SOCIETY AND CHALLENGE THE EXISTING ORDER?

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*The revolution was bourgeois inasmuch as the bourgeois gained the greatest advantages from it.*

– JEAN-PIERRE HIRSCH, 1990

## Overview

The Enlightenment's radical ideas taught educated people to think critically about the society around them. These ideas affected the way people saw the old regime, but they alone could not have caused a revolution. In this chapter, we will examine other social forces, and ask whether there were some social classes that actively aimed to change French politics and society.



In eighteenth-century France, the most ambitious – and most frustrated – social group was the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie felt that they could not play a role in the political life of the nation matching their talents and skills. However, new social movements and ideas were not limited to the bourgeoisie: there were *also* powerful social forces of criticism among the two privileged orders, especially the 'liberal' nobles and clergy, who believed that French society needed reform.

## Key issues

- How did the growing expectations of the bourgeoisie challenge the existing order?
- How do historians debate the role of the bourgeoisie?
- How did the liberal nobility challenge the existing order?
- Who was Comte de Mirabeau?
- How did the American War of Independence influence French society?
- Who was the Marquis de Lafayette?

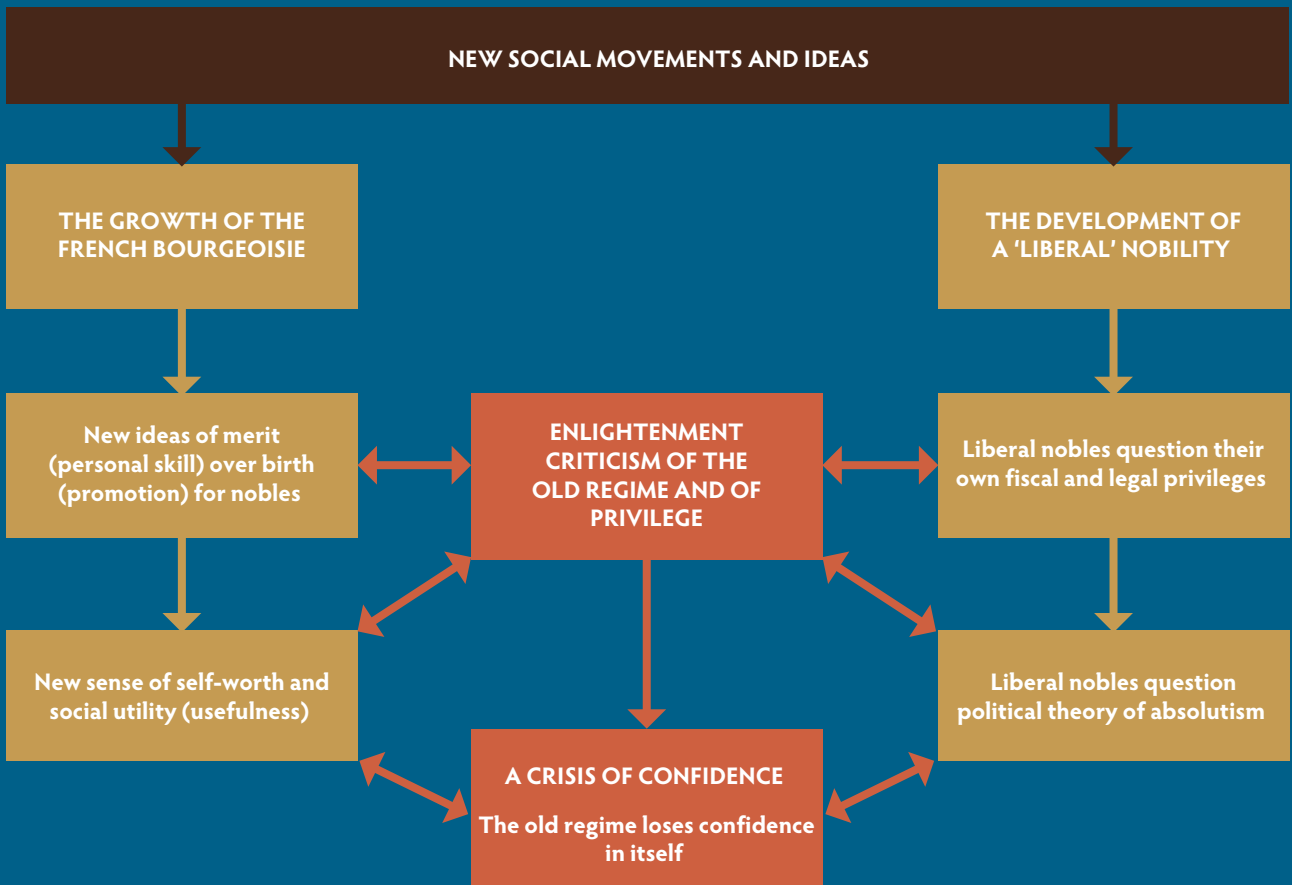
## Digital resources for this chapter

In the *Interactive Textbook*:

-  video and audio sources and questions
-  digital activities.

◀ **Source 4.0** *The Union of the Three Orders*, Michel-Nicholas Perseval, 1789. This painting depicts the clergy, nobility and the Third Estate working together.

# Flow of chapter



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# Chapter timeline

1733

Voltaire writes his Letters on England defending ideas such as merit and utility



1788

The Society of Thirty is formed to discuss constitutional and political matters



1776

Lafayette goes to America to assist the colonists in their War of Independence



1768

An unnamed 'bourgeois of Montpellier' dares to suggest that the orders of society could be arranged differently

1785

Lafayette returns from military service with George Washington in America, and publicises himself as a 'freedom fighter' and champion of Liberty

## 4.1 How did the growing expectations of the bourgeoisie challenge the existing order?

While many historians agree that ideas are very powerful, they would say that ideas alone cannot cause a revolution. Ideas have to link up with social forces. The most powerful are the rising, but unsatisfied, expectations of certain classes in society.

One of the classes in the Third Estate was the bourgeoisie. During the eighteenth century, members of the bourgeoisie realised they were not playing a role in national life that matched their talents and abilities, and they formed radical ideas expressing a new sense of self-worth, social utility and ambition.

### How did new ideas of utility and merit mobilise society?

The bourgeoisie's most important belief was that a person's social importance should not depend upon their **birth** (noble or common), but upon their **utility** (usefulness, in terms of productive labour) and **merit** (their combination of personal abilities). This dangerous new idea rejected the prestige of noble birth, which allowed aristocrats to dominate high positions in the government, church and army, often without suitable qualifications or skills.

This emphasis on social usefulness and personal merit, and the appreciation of the productive power of the Third Estate, can be traced to *philosophes* such as Voltaire, who argued for the dignity and importance of the most productive members of society. In his letter 'On Commerce' (in *Letters on England*), he praised the English gentry, who were allowed to engage in productive activity, such as trade, without losing their gentility.

**birth** an individual's status as either commoner or nobility, determined at birth

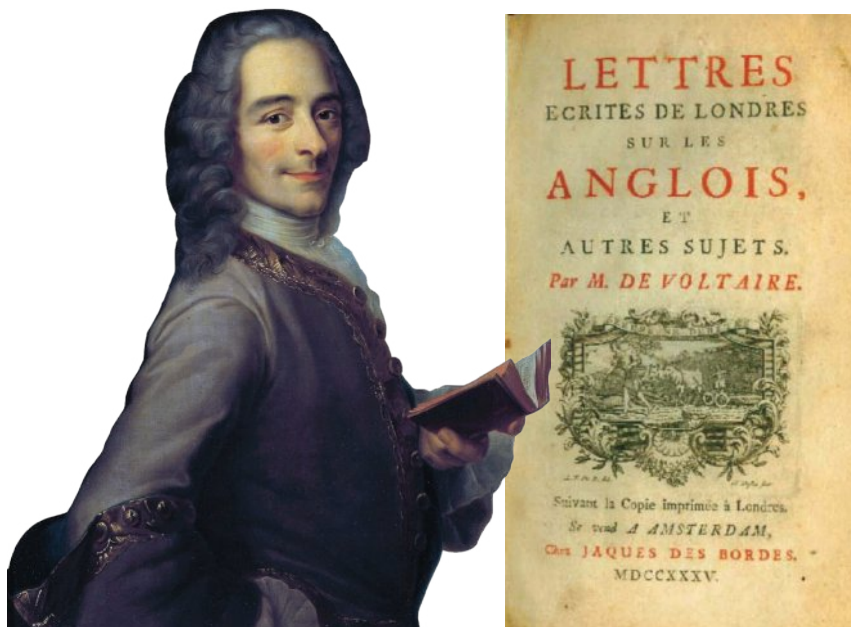
**utility** usefulness, in terms of productive labour

**merit** combination of an individual's personal abilities

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#### FOCUS QUESTIONS 4.1

- 1 What did eighteenth-century people mean by words such as 'utility' and 'merit'?
- 2 Why would these concepts have been new as well as radical in the society of the old regime?



◀ Source 4.1 Voltaire as a young man with his *Letters on England*



ANALYSIS ACTIVITY 4.1: READING A PRIMARY SOURCE



Voltaire defends the idea of utility

Voltaire's 'On Commerce' from *Letters on England*, 1733

*In France, anyone is a marquis who wants to be and whoever arrives in Paris with money to spend ... can say 'a man like me, a man of my standing', and loftily despise a business man, and the business man so often hears people speak disparagingly of his profession that he is foolish enough to blush. Yet, I wonder which is more useful to a nation: a well-powdered nobleman who knows exactly at what minute the king goes to bed and who gives himself grand airs while playing the part of a slave in some minister's antechamber, or a business man who enriches his country, issues orders from his office to Surat or Cairo, and contributes to the wellbeing of the world.*

Source 4.2 From Voltaire, *Letters on England*, trans. by Leonard Tancock, 1984, pp. 51–2

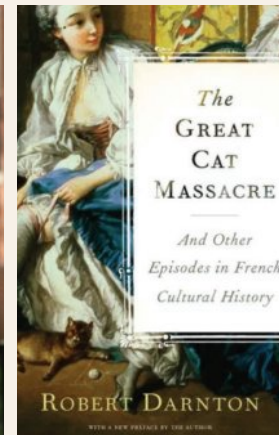
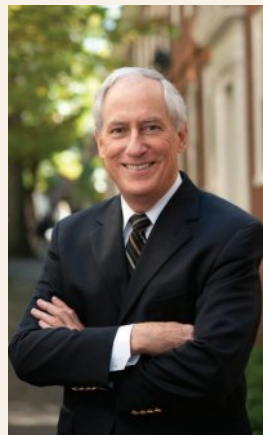
- 1 How does Voltaire undermine the prestige of noble title and rank?
- 2 How does he suggest that nobles are now leading almost useless lives?
- 3 Why does Voltaire feel that merchants should be regarded as being far more important than they currently are?

KEY HISTORIAN



Robert Darnton (1939–)

Historian Robert Darnton discovered an episode suggesting that people read the *philosophes* and did apply their questioning spirit to their own society. The episode occurred during one of the regular town processions of eighteenth-century France, when the order of society was made visible in the structure of the great parade of all the town's groups.



► Source 4.3 Left: Robert Darnton. Right: *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* by Robert Darnton (2009).

A bourgeois reconsiders the structure of society

In 1768, a bourgeois of Montpellier was watching his town's procession – a sort of 'blueprint of society' – and deciding that it was all outdated. The unidentified writer was perhaps a middling bourgeois – a doctor, lawyer or administrator. He concluded that the traditional hierarchy of the Three Estates needed to be changed.

The First Estate should be abolished, because the clergy was not important in his region. The nobility, who in Montpellier were mainly nobility of the robe, could move up to the First Estate. The **most useful class** – the magistrates, lawyers, doctors, landowners, merchants and traders (his own class) – would form the Second Estate, the 'Bourgeois' Estate. Then, significantly, he snobbishly put working people such as artisans in the working Third Estate. He did not specifically mention any *philosophe*, because he didn't need to: we can hear Voltaire's voice behind his. The 'bourgeois of

**most useful class** a proposed bourgeois estate (comprising magistrates, lawyers, doctors, landowners, merchants and traders) that would form a new Second Estate

Montpellier' did not, as far as we know, become a great revolutionary leader, but if an educated man could question age-old social structures like this, presumably many other educated people could, too. His mental replanning of society was a clear sign of the development of a social group's identity and worth.

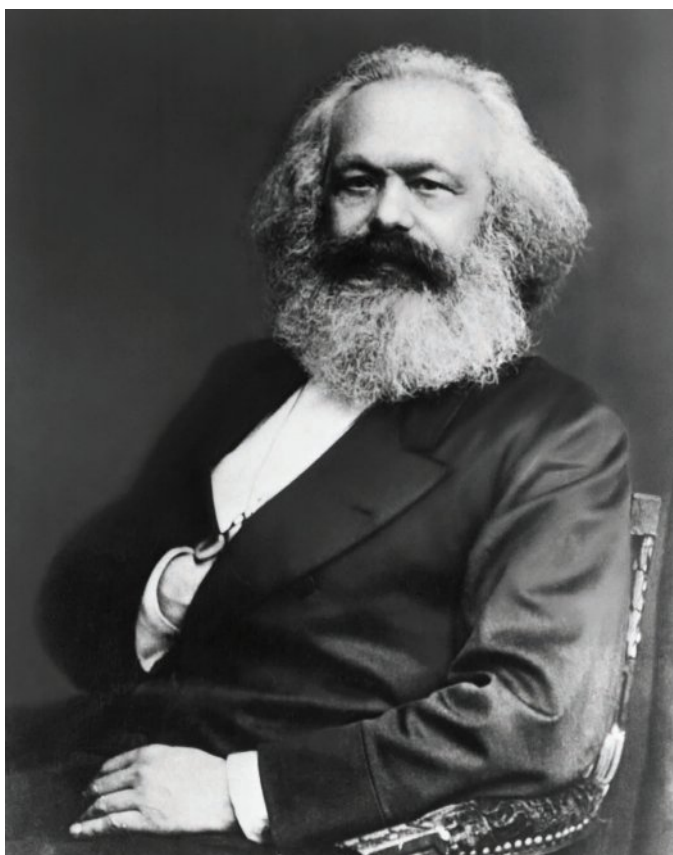




▲ Source 4.4 This painting shows a typical town procession in the city of Lille; comprising a number of different corporations, or groups, with their own special rights.

## 4.2 The role of the bourgeoisie

Students of history are often puzzled that various historians have widely different views on what caused a revolution. After all, they are talking about the same set of events, so surely there cannot be much room for differences of opinion.



In fact, the process of analysing a historian's point of view is the very stuff of history. When we are faced with two opposing views of what caused the revolution, we have to go back to the facts and use them to decide which is the most accurate explanation. For example, historians who had been strongly influenced by the work of Karl Marx – such as George Lefebvre, Albert Soboul and George Rudé – naturally thought that the French Revolution was the first sign that a new commercial bourgeoisie would, as Marx had predicted, want to overthrow the rule of kings and nobles. This interpretation seemed very convincing: France *did* have a new, large and ambitious bourgeoisie, and the revolution *did* end the absolute power of kings and the privileges of the nobles. Point proven ... or so it seemed.

◀ Source 4.5 Karl Marx, the German political thinker who influenced historians such as Soboul and Rudé



Convincing explanations can be – and should be – questioned, interrogated and re-evaluated. In this case, British historians, led by the great pioneer Alfred Cobban and followed by the likes of William Doyle, pulled apart the interpretation of a revolutionary bourgeoisie overthrowing the monarchy and nobility. These historians pointed out that the French Revolution was not as simple as a sort of footy match with Team A (the ambitious bourgeoisie) against Team B (the old royalty and nobility). They proved their point of view by looking at the facts.

The bourgeoisie certainly played a role, but these were not the great capitalists of an industrial age; they were middling people and they worked as lawyers, doctors, journalists and government officials. The bourgeoisie also did not act alone: they had the help of some liberal clergy, such as the Abbé Sieyès, and of liberal nobles, such as Philippe Duc d'Orléans.

The British historians showed that the French Revolution was far more complicated than a simple battle between two opposing social groups. A new view has replaced the old, established one, and our understanding of the causes of the French Revolution has become more detailed and more accurate.

#### FOCUS QUESTIONS 4.2

- 1 Why did historians such as Soboul and Rudé want to think that the French Revolution was driven by a capitalist bourgeoisie?
- 2 How did historians, such as Cobban and Doyle, prove that the French bourgeoisie who took part in the revolution cannot be called a capitalist class?

### 4.3 How did the liberal nobility challenge the existing order?

The bourgeoisie were aware of and articulate about their social value, and were challenging the restrictions imposed upon them by the old regime. Many of the revolution's leaders were bourgeois, so many of the revolution's achievements – such as the principle of merit and the sale of land – benefited that group most. However, members of the privileged orders also questioned the political and social system.

According to historian Daniel Wick, historians such as Lefebvre, who are influenced by Marx, forget that liberal nobles were also important in the pre-revolutionary and first revolutionary period. Wick argues that the number and influence of liberal nobles, such as Condorcet, Lafayette, Liancourt, Talleyrand and Mirabeau, were considerable. For France, the theme of 'a loss of confidence in the regime' must be extended to people *within* the system; the old regime was, in effect, losing confidence in itself.

**altruistic** unselfish in relation to others

A second source of opposition was the aristocratic salons, where nobles who were concerned about the state of the nation gathered around a hostess sympathetic to their opinions. Opposition was publicised in the **altruistic** actions of some young nobles, such as the young Marquis de Lafayette going to America to help the colonists in their fight for liberty from Britain. It also occurred when traditional tensions within the nobility – such as the ill-feeling between the court nobles and the provincial nobles – mixed with new political attitudes, including public concern about the royal court's wastefulness. Opposition was strengthened when prominent figures from high noble families, like the Comte de Mirabeau, supported liberal ideas.

Later, liberal nobles moved from salon discussion to another form of upper-class sociability, the club, forming groups such as the Society of Thirty (the Constitutional Club), which met in Paris from November 1788 until May 1789. Noble high society was itself a place of real power, above the institutional structures of royal government.

## 4.4

## SIGNIFICANT INDIVIDUAL



### Honoré Gabriel, Comte de Mirabeau (1749–1791)

Mirabeau came from a great noble family. He owed his great influence not to his political radicalism, but to the enormous power of his public speaking; unlike **Robespierre**, he had a magnificent voice, a commanding presence and an inspiring delivery. His vision of a constitutional monarchy was more conservative than Lafayette's and the Feuillants. He suggested that the king have an **absolute veto** over laws, rather than the **suspensive veto** he was given. As a member of the National Assembly, he served as a moderating counter-balance to its more radical elements.

**Robespierre** French revolutionary who was leader of the Jacobin Club and architect of the Terror

**absolute veto** right to reject legislative enactments

**suspensive veto** the ability of the king to delay law for four years



▲ **Source 4.6** Mirabeau was a fiery and eloquent speaker who was seen as the popular hero of ordinary working people. He once said, 'I am a mad dog from whose bite despots will die'. The engraving on the right imagines Mirabeau as a Jupiter figure, using his thunderbolts to blast the privileges of nobles and clergy.

Mirabeau later became subject to rumours that he was in the pay of the king and was a royal spy; he died from natural causes in 1791 and was later identified as a traitor to the revolution.

## 4.5 How did the American War of Independence influence French society?

For people living in France in the 1770s and 1780s, the American colonists' struggle against British domination provided an enthralling spectacle of a struggle for freedom. The colonialists' struggle was based on the central principle of '**no taxation without representation**'; that is, the colonists in distant America had no representatives in Britain's parliament but were expected to pay taxes to the monarchy. Since the American colonists were made to pay taxes they had not agreed to pay, they were in a similar but not identical position to the people in France.

**no taxation without representation** the idea that a monarchy cannot impose taxes without approval from representatives in parliament who pay those taxes



**mercenary** a professional soldier who is paid to fight

The American colonists' main political theories were that personal liberty and freedoms were precious, but always under threat from tyranny. The colonialists were most fearful of kings who had a standing (permanent) army, and especially suspicious if that army contained **mercenary** soldiers. As William Doyle contends:

*From the start of their quarrel with British authority, the Americans used the language of Liberty and representation, striking immediate echoes in a France obsessed with despotism.*

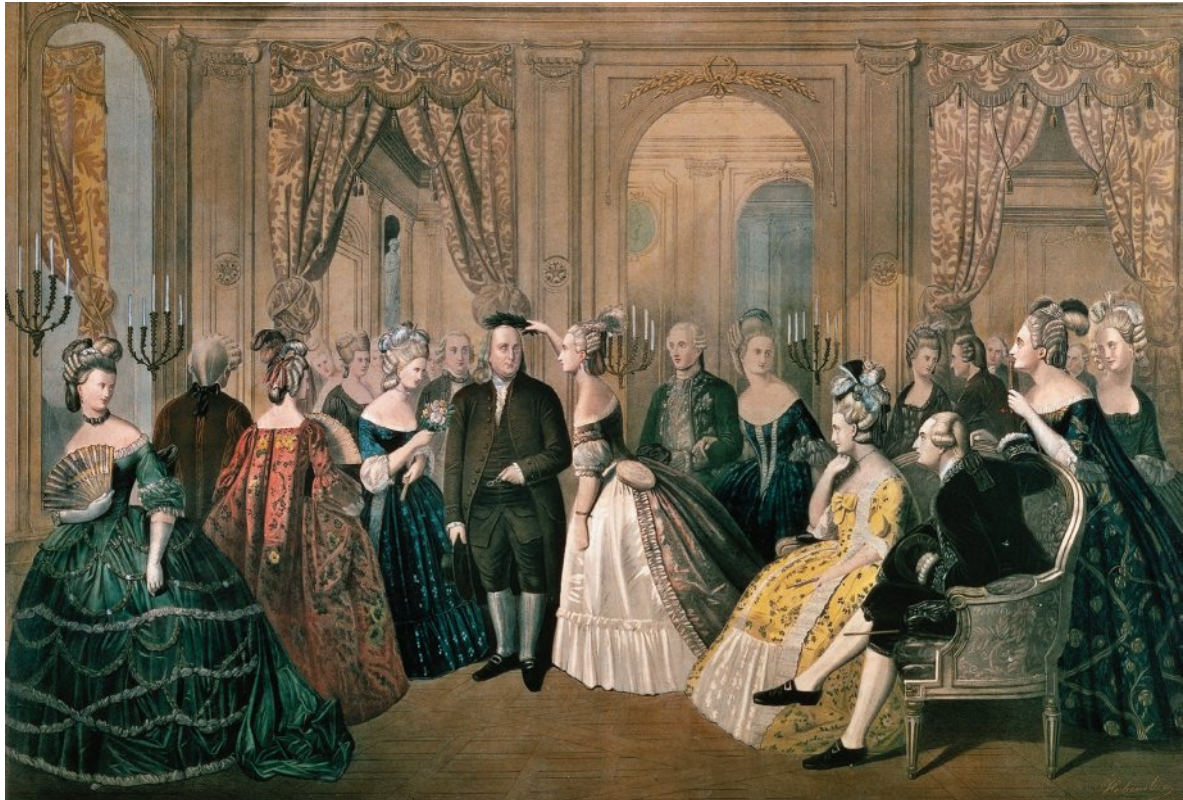
Louis XVI was under pressure to become involved in the war on the side of the colonists, especially by his aristocratic army officers, who thirsted to avenge the humiliation of their defeat in the Seven Years' War. However, Louis XVI hesitated to do so because he was wary of the power of the Royal Navy and the British Army; he could not afford a costly war ending in another defeat. Accordingly, the king forbade his officers from going individually as volunteers to help the colonists. Some of them, such as the Marquis de Lafayette, volunteered anyway. Lafayette became a close friend of George Washington and helped provide some of the military strategies that would assist the ragged Continental Army defeat one of the greatest professional armies in the world.

In 1777, news of American victories at Saratoga and Germantown convinced Louis XVI that the colonists had a chance of winning and led to him formally giving his financial support. If America emerged as a major nation, it might offer significant trading advantages to its helpful ally, France. This was a financial gamble that ultimately did not pay off; the United States of America did emerge as a major power, but relatively few trading benefits resulted for France.



◀ **Source 4.7** *Washington before Yorktown* by Rembrandt Peale. George Washington, first president of the United States of America, is in the centre of the painting. On the left hand side of the painting is the Marquis de Lafayette.

The War of Independence captured the public imagination in France as an example of a struggle for freedom. The 8000 officers and men who had served returned in 1783 to find themselves popular heroes. People in France read a translation of Tom Paine's influential pamphlet, *Common Sense*, and flocked to hear the picturesque Benjamin Franklin – a *philosophe* allegedly emerged from the wilds of America and a natural man as imagined by Rousseau – who served as American ambassador in Paris between 1777–83. Indeed, one of the most important ideas of the French Revolution came from Franklin, who first informed Mirabeau that officers in America had created an aristocratic order to commemorate their service in the war. From this, Mirabeau conceived his own idea of the abolition of noble honours, titles and privileges in France. And for the clever ones, such as Lafayette, it was possible to construct a new identity in France as a freedom fighter. Having helped America acquire its freedom, Lafayette claimed he could help France do the same.



▲ Source 4.8 This print from 1778 shows Benjamin Franklin being received at the French court in Versailles.

For many of the French, America was an enthralling spectacle of heroic resistance and ultimate victory in the face of overwhelming force. Historians agree that France's contribution of money, men and guns was of prime importance in this victory. But, more importantly, America proved that it was possible in the modern world to redesign a political and social system on enlightened, reasonable principles. William Doyle concludes:

*It was the simple fact that new starts were shown to be possible. Existing political authority could be thrown off, and institutions rebuilt from their foundations on more rational, freer lines. The improvement, the regeneration, of human laws was no longer a matter of Utopian [idealistic] dreaming.*



◀ Source 4.9 Two revolutions cross paths: on the left is a statue of Benjamin Franklin in Paris and on the right is a statue of Lafayette in the town named after him in California.

4.6

SIGNIFICANT INDIVIDUAL



**The Marquis de Lafayette (1757–1834)**

The Marquis de Lafayette was long seen as a dashing and romantic, but minor, figure in the first stage of the revolution; his enemies called him 'General Goldilocks' to mock his youthful good looks. On closer examination, he emerges as an important leader who perfectly illustrates the main tensions within the revolution.

First, the timespan of his influence is clearly defined; he returned from America in 1785 and was therefore in Paris during the intellectual ferment that preceded the events of 1789. By July 1789, he was the most important leader of the first stage of the revolution because of his strategic power, influence and popularity.

Lafayette's career intersects neatly with other critical aspects of France in the 1780s: the power of pornography and scandal, the influence of key documents, and the use of public spectacle to orchestrate and to channel volatile popular emotion. Lafayette's popularity also inspired many visual representations of a revolutionary hero. His later fall from power in 1792 was rapid and he was imprisoned for the next five years.



▲ Source 4.10 A dashing young Lafayette

As a liberal noble, Lafayette was a revolutionary leader who was not from the Third Estate. Like Sieyès, he proves that the revolution was not solely the expression of an ambitious but frustrated bourgeoisie. His career demonstrates that a leader comes to power by being able to offer specific skills in a given moment of the revolution. He owed his importance to two mechanisms of control: the institutional control exerted through the National Guard; and the popular control exerted over the Parisian crowd by the charisma of a hero.

**The basis of Lafayette's popularity: The American spirit**

**American spirit** a wave of French public sympathy for the American struggle, which was expressed in popular plays, novels and paintings

Lafayette's charisma derived from his involvement in the American War of Independence. To understand his popularity, we need to understand the importance of the **American spirit** in the 1780s. The American Revolution was a precedent, because it had demonstrated that enlightened thought could indeed challenge royal power, and could successfully make political and social changes.

The final victory of the Americans over Britain proved that royal power could be resisted, and that it was possible to create a republic in the modern world. Lafayette cleverly publicised his role in the American War of Independence; he returned to France with the reputation of a genuine freedom fighter in a successful, and comparatively peaceful, revolution.

Lafayette belonged to an eminent family of the upper nobility from the Auvergne, but was a liberally minded noble who was passionately committed to reform. He associated his name with liberty, saying that he:

*cherished Liberty with the conviction of a geometer, the passion of a lover and the enthusiasm of religion.*

Source 4.11 J.M. Thompson, *Leaders of the French Revolution*, 1963, p. 24



▲ **Source 4.12** This painting by Michel Garnier shows how the American War of Independence captured the popular imagination in the 1780s. Here, an idealistic young French officer leaves his family and fiancée to go and fight for liberty in the colonies.

After meeting Benjamin Franklin in Paris in 1776, Lafayette resigned his captaincy in the French army. He went to America, defying the authority of his family and his King's instructions. Lafayette outshone other volunteer foreign officers: he was younger, more capable and more committed. Of America, he wrote enthusiastically:

*A sweet equality prevails here universally. The richest man and the poorest are on a level...*

Lafayette helped the colonial army at Valley Forge, where he became friends with George Washington. He impressed Washington with his idealism and willingness to serve without pay. If Lafayette had originally been given a command because of his aristocratic rank, he quickly demonstrated his real merit in the field; he expertly commanded American forces at major battles such as Brandywine, Newport and Yorktown.

► **Source 4.13** An engraving of George Washington and the Marquis de Lafayette during the American War of Independence





▲ **Source 4.14** This image shows Lafayette with General George Washington at the battle of Valley Forge in the American War of Independence

Lafayette returned to Paris in 1785, proudly referring to the revolution as his own achievement. He boasted:

*My great affair is settled; America is sure of her independence; humanity has gained its cause; and liberty will never be without a refuge.*

He assumed the hero's place among the liberal circles of the Paris of the 1780s, mixing with reformers such as Condorcet, planning a model slave plantation with Rochefoucauld, and helping Thomas Jefferson arrange commercial treaties between America and France. The King forgave his disobedience, but cautioned him against stating liberal opinions in Paris. Lafayette became an unofficial ambassador for America, and for a generalised mood of criticism and reformism; the American spirit was a set of liberal or 'patriot' reformist ideas that included an admiration for the colonists' struggle and their creation of a new society.

## THE STORY SO FAR

By the 1780s, radical ideas and criticisms of the old regime had linked up with new social movements, notably the increasing confidence and ambition of the bourgeoisie, and the growing doubt of some members of the privileged orders. Not all bourgeois, and certainly not all nobles, supported new thought, but a substantial number did, and this gave radical ideas real power. Even so, the criticism of the old regime might have remained simply a critique without the experience of a major crisis that would sharpen the debate and make the need for reform seem urgent.

Use the QR code or visit the Interactive Textbook and watch the video summarising the chapter.





## Develop your historical-thinking skills

### Using historical terms meaningfully

Write an extended paragraph explaining why new political and social values in France were challenging the existing social order by the end of the eighteenth century. Use the following terms to show you understand their meaning and context:

- bourgeoisie
- utility
- merit
- *Letters on England*
- Mirabeau
- Lafayette
- American War of Independence.

### Constructing historical arguments

What did eighteenth-century people mean by utility? Why was this idea automatically a critique of the privileged orders and a defence of the Third Estate?

### Analysing historian's interpretations

#### Albert Soboul (1914–1982)

The historian Albert Soboul wrote in 1970 that he still regarded the French Revolution as the great bourgeois revolution:

*The revolution of 1789–94 marked the appearance of modern bourgeois and capitalist society in the history of France. Its most significant aspect was its achievement of national unity for the country by its destruction of still-existing elements of the **seigneurial** regime and the 'feudal' privileged orders ... The fact that the French Revolution ended finally in the establishment of a liberal democracy adds another dimension to its historical significance. From the point of view of these two achievements ... it deserves to be considered the classic model of a bourgeois revolution.*

**seigneurial** semi-feudal system of land distribution

**Source 4.15** Cited in Ralph Greenlaw (ed.), *The Social Origins of the French Revolution*, 1975, p. 17

- 1 Is it true to say that the 'patriot' movement was made up purely of bourgeois who wanted to overthrow the nobility?
- 2 Is it true to say that the 'patriot' movement aimed only to solve problems that affected the bourgeoisie?
- 3 What does Soboul understand by a 'bourgeois' revolution?
- 4 Why would a historian like Soboul be anxious to prove that the French Revolution confirmed Karl Marx's theory of the stages in the development of human society?



# 5 **HOW FRANCE'S FINANCIAL CRISIS BECAME A POLITICAL CRISIS, 1774–89**

*The French Revolution of 1789 was the product of medium-term political and financial crises within the state and the destabilising efforts to resolve them.*

— NIGEL ASTON, 2004

## Overview

The crisis that shook the French monarchy in 1774–89 developed quickly through distinct stages. The first was a financial crisis caused by overspending, heavy borrowing and, inevitably, heavy interest repayments. The only ways to deal with such crises are to borrow more money or increase taxes. When both methods proved difficult, the monarchy was in trouble. The second stage was a fiscal crisis of the taxation system, because the need to raise new taxes highlighted the inefficiency and unfairness of France's tax system.

The debate about tax was also a political crisis, because it questioned the monarch's right to impose taxes without consulting a representative body. Since France did not have a parliament, the king had to consider consulting other bodies – the Assembly of Notables, the high law courts (*parlements*) or the Estates-General – each of which was problematic.



In this chapter, we will analyse how and why one financial problem threw the whole monarchy into crisis.

## Key issues

- What was the cause of the nation's financial problems?
- Who was Marie-Antoinette?
- Did the old regime try to reform itself?
- Who was Jacques Necker?
- How did the financial crisis become a political crisis?
- What was the Day of the Tiles?
- What did the Books of Grievances show?
- Who was Philippe, Duc d'Orléans?

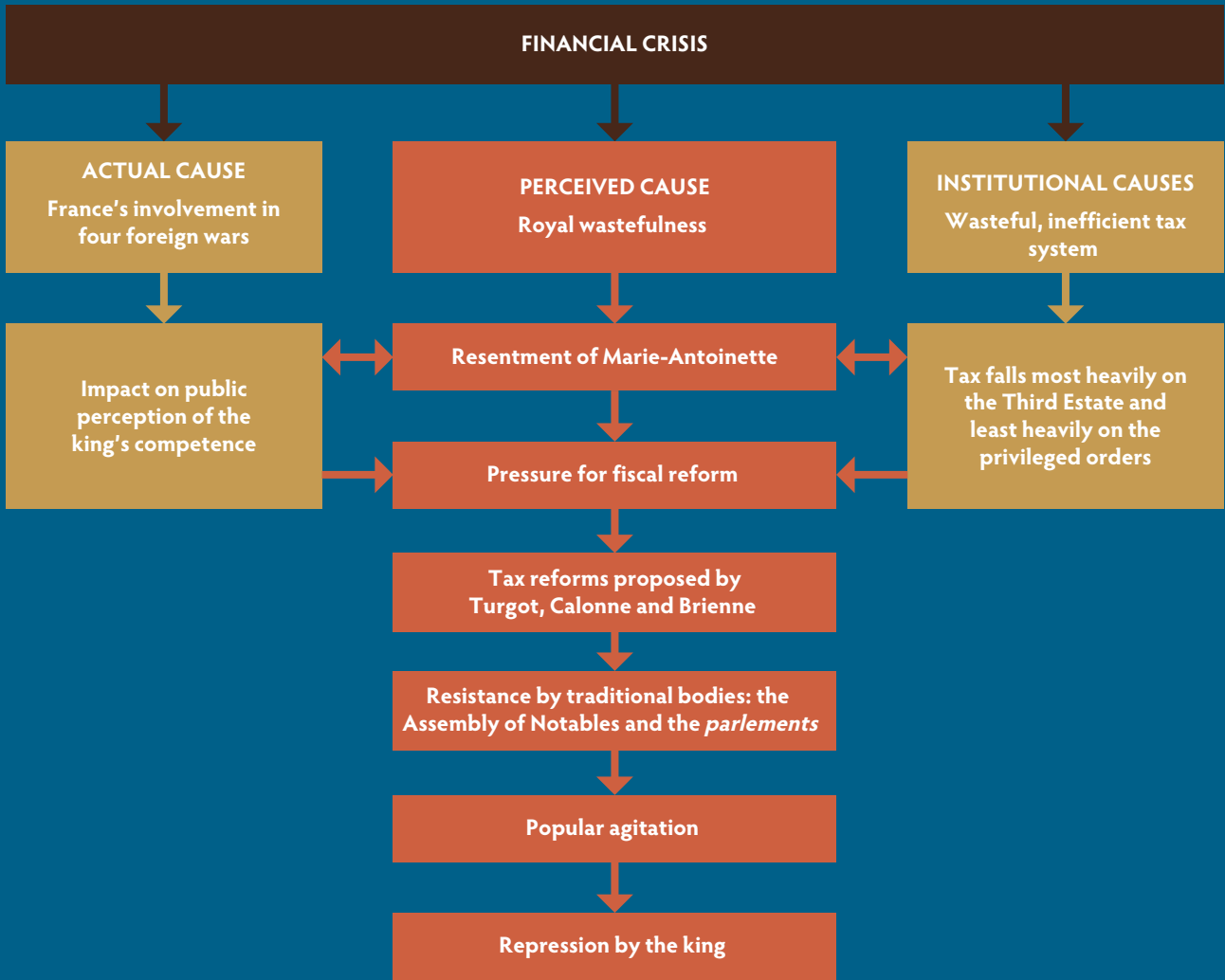
## Digital resources for this chapter

In the *Interactive Textbook*:

-  video and audio sources and questions
-  digital activities.

◀ **Source 5.0** Marie-Antoinette receives ambassadors of Tipu Sultan on 8 August 1788. The extravagance of royal spectacles such as this was perceived as one of the main reasons for the economic crisis, although this is not true.

# Flow of chapter



64

# Chapter timeline

**1778**  
France makes an alliance to support the American colonists against the British

**1786**  
Calonne presents his plans for tax reform to Louis XVI

**JULY 1787**  
The parlements reject Brienne's proposals for reform and demand the calling of the Estates-General



**1781**  
Necker's Compte Rendu hides the extent of France's debt



**FEBRUARY 1787**  
Assembly of Notables rejects Calonne's reform proposals

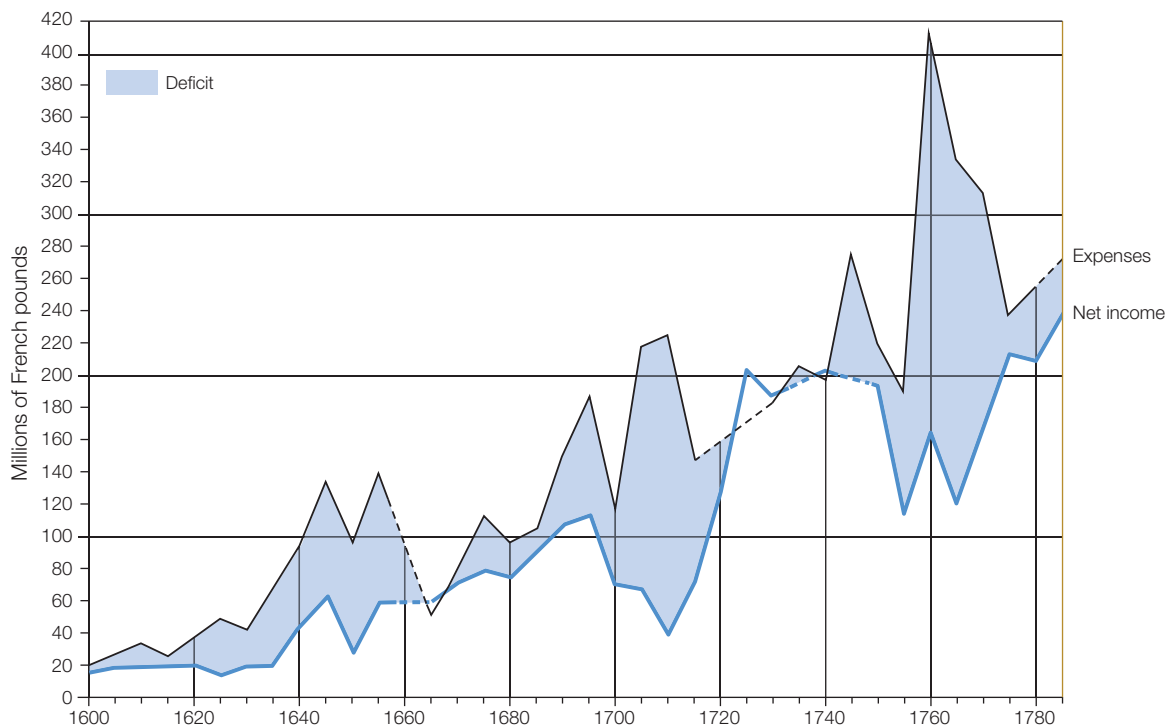


## 5.1 The making of a crisis: The nation's financial problem

The traditional story of the financial crisis of the monarchy began on 20 August 1786, when the Minister of Finance, Calonne, informed Louis XVI that France's financial situation was serious. The most important cause was the four wars France had waged between 1733 and 1783, costing a total of £4000 million (French pounds or *livres*). France had borrowed £1250 million since 1776 and now had an annual deficit of £112 million, with a total revenue of £475 million.



When a nation has a large debt, financiers are hesitant to lend it more money. The possibility of raising indirect taxes on food and goods was not available, and the option of increasing direct taxes on the Third Estate was not possible either. Thus, bankruptcy was inevitable unless the tax system was totally reformed. The financial crisis (a large national debt) became a fiscal crisis (a debate about the nation's taxation system), and the system of revenue and expenditure itself was questioned.



Adapted from A. Guery, 'Les finances de la monarchie française sous l'Ancien Regime', 1978.

▲ **Source 5.1** This graph charts the course of France's financial disaster. From 1620 onwards, France's expenses (*black line*) was usually well above its net income (*blue line*), creating a deficit (*blue shading*). This deficit had spiked dramatically in 1760, recovered, but then started to go back up in 1775 at the time of the American War of Independence.

### The perception of royal wastefulness

People believed that this financial crisis was caused by mismanagement (which could be solved by appointing the right Minister of Finance) and by excessive expenditure (which could be solved by exercising control over royal spending). Public opinion wrongly blamed the crisis on the lavish expenditure of the court because of wild rumours about the luxurious tastes of Marie-Antoinette (referred to metaphorically as 'Madame Deficit').

In reality, the royal court only spent about 6 per cent of France's budget. These rumours were exaggerated by jealous nobles who had lost the queen's favour and who paid writers to produce scandal sheets about her expensive gifts to favourites.



FOCUS QUESTIONS 5.1

- 1 What effect would a financial crisis have on the public's perception that the king was competent to rule?
- 2 Why would rumours about the queen's wastefulness be so damaging when they were not in fact true?

◀ **Source 5.2** The queen was the perceived cause of the debt; by the 1780s, the usual 'signs' of royal authority were not working the way they were meant to. When this portrait was exhibited at the Paris Salon of 1787, somebody pinned a note on it saying, 'Here is the deficit!'

AMAZING BUT TRUE ...

Marie-Antoinette enjoyed extravagant hairstyles. Her hairdresser delighted her by creating elaborate hair-dos that sometimes rose more than a metre above her head. The most famous of these showed the hair arranged into the waves of the ocean, with a model of a French battleship on top.



▶ **Source 5.3** An example of Marie-Antoinette's elaborate hairstyles of the time. The ship is inspired by the French frigate *Belle Poule*.

## 5.2

## SIGNIFICANT INDIVIDUAL



## Queen Marie-Antoinette (1755–1793)

Marie-Antoinette is one of the most famous, but also one of the most misunderstood, figures of the French Revolution. Born in 1755, the daughter of Austrian Emperor Francis I and Maria-Theresa of Austria, she was married at age 15 to Louis-Auguste of France, the future Louis XVI, in 1770. This was not a marriage of love; she was used to consolidate a peace treaty between France and Austria.



◀ **Source 5.4** These two images tell the story of Marie-Antoinette's life. The delicate pastel drawing of the beautiful young woman (left) was painted by Joseph Ducreux in Vienna in 1769 and sent to Versailles the year before her marriage to Louis. She knew barely anything about the country of which she would soon be queen. The second painting, showing an aged, worn woman, was painted by Alexander Kucharsky when he visited her in the Temple Prison in 1793. Shortly after this was painted, she was executed at the guillotine.

It is true that Marie-Antoinette spent lavishly on clothing and jewellery as queen after 1774, to the extent that her mother warned her not to be so extravagant. When this characteristic became linked with public concern about the national debt in the 1780s, it made her deeply unpopular. Yet, she was also the victim of unfair rumours; the infamous Diamond Necklace Affair (1785–86) created the impression that she had ordered some scandalously expensive jewellery, whereas she was the completely innocent victim of a confidence trickster. She led a sheltered life in the palace and had little understanding of France or its people.



▲ **Source 5.5** A print from 1787 that shows a cross-section of Marie Antoinette's laundry at Versailles

## 5.3 The old regime tries to reform itself

During the 1770s and 1780s, people believed that the nation was in financial crisis but would not, or could not, achieve the reforms necessary to resolve it. To what degree was the old regime able to respond to pressures for change? Could it reform itself?

### A warning voice not heeded: Turgot (1774 to 1776)

France's financial crisis need not have occurred. Jacques Turgot, a brilliant economist who supported free trade, was Controller General of Finances from 1774 to 1776. He proved that the national debt could be reduced, and bankruptcy avoided, by introducing strict economies in royal spending, such as reducing the expensive pensions the king distributed. His motto was 'No new taxes, no new loans, no bankruptcy'. By 1776, royal spending had been reduced enough to convince Dutch bankers to again lend money to France.

Turgot also hoped to introduce a single tax on land to replace indirect taxes and to avoid costly involvement in the American War of Independence. However, his *Six Edicts* (1776) angered the privileged classes by suggesting abolition of the labour tax and other dues, provoking them to conspire against him at Versailles and secure his dismissal before he could achieve further reforms. Turgot courageously warned the king about the war: 'The first shot will drive the State to bankruptcy'. He was right, but he was dismissed.

► **Source 5.6** This engraving is a representation of Turgot, the Finance Minister who correctly warned the King that participating in the American War of Independence would ruin France.



### A clever appearance of fiscal reform: Necker (1776 to 1781)

When Jacques Necker was appointed Director of the Treasury, the nation's finances urgently needed reform. He knew people had rejected the cutbacks recommended by Turgot. He also avoided new taxes, believing that existing taxes were enough, if collected properly; he thought **tax farming** was wasteful.

**tax farming** the collection of royal taxes by individuals on behalf of the government

Necker juggled the accounts to suggest financial recovery, but he borrowed £520 million to finance the American war, listing the heavy interest payments as 'normal spending'. When his enemies criticised him, he published his *Financial Summary for the King*, misleadingly suggesting that France had fought the American war, paid no new taxes and still had £10 million credit over expenditure.

► **Source 5.7** Jacques Necker achieved a reputation as a financial wizard.







◀ **Source 5.8** The caption reads: 'Great Necker, your wise prudence makes our hearts glad. You have brought abundance back to us, under the good pleasure of Louis.' His **Compte Rendu** is shown open nearby.

**Compte Rendu** Jacques Necker's 'National Account', which cleverly hid the true nature of France's crippling national debt, thus delaying by five years the inevitable process of trying to resolve it by reform of taxation

**tax farmers** private tax collectors

## Calonne's attempt at reform (1783 to 1787)

When Necker's successor, Charles-Alexandre Calonne, became Controller-General in 1783, France had made peace with Britain and calculated the total cost of its involvement in the American War of Independence: a staggering £1066 million. Calonne still did not limit the royal court's spending, believing that visible spending generated public confidence; however, people were no longer dazzled by royal pomp and ceremony, and instead saw it as the cause of France's financial problems.

Calonne presented a 'plan for the improvement of the finances' to Louis XVI in 1786, recommending the replacement of multiple income taxes – which the nobles and clergy largely avoided paying – with one uniform land tax. This uniform tax would vary according to income and it would be paid by everybody without exception. Calonne viewed private tax collectors (**tax farmers**) collecting indirect taxes for the government as wasteful. He suggested that the local assemblies in each province could better calculate tax liability and collect it, estimating that this streamlined tax system would produce £35 million more. To encourage economic activity, Calonne would abolish the internal tax barriers and external tariffs. To bring in some revenue to keep the state going in the short term, he wanted a new series of loans.

Calonne hesitated to ask the uncooperative *parlements* for approval and was uncertain how the traditional representative assembly, the Estates-General, would vote. Instead, he appealed for guidance to another traditional council, the Assembly of Notables, an advisory body sometimes convened by the king.



### FOCUS QUESTIONS 5.2

- 1 What was the cause of the massive national debt that created France's bankruptcy?
- 2 What factors prevented finance ministers from making the reforms that might have saved the monarchy from bankruptcy?

► **Source 5.9** Finance Minister Charles-Alexandre Calonne

## 5.4

## SIGNIFICANT INDIVIDUAL



### Jacques Necker (1732–1804)

Jacques Necker was a significant individual in the first stages of the revolution because he came to represent, in the French public's mind, a broader idea of sound financial management and administrative integrity. Because the origins of the French Revolution lay in a financial crisis, the large national debt which developed into a fiscal crisis, the nation's failing taxation system, it was inevitable that public opinion would be focused on financial matters. Public opinion was most especially focused on Necker, who appeared to have the expertise to remedy the nation's problems.

Necker's appointment to the high position of Director General of Finances (in modern terms, a treasurer) was unusual. He was a foreigner from Geneva in Switzerland and a Protestant in Catholic France. Moreover, he was not a nobleman, as ministers usually were. Necker's significance and his temporary fame was based largely on his first period of office from 1776–81. During this time he strategically avoided having to impose new taxes to finance France's involvement in the American War of Independence. Instead, he took out loans to pay for the costs of the war.

In his first period of office, Necker helped meet the loan repayments by reforming the tax system to make it more efficient. The great financial companies resented his interference, while nobles who had lost some tax privileges also stirred up criticism of his methods in pamphlets. In particular, Necker reduced the number of tax farmers; that is, rich men who paid for the right to collect taxes for the king.

They launched a campaign of criticism against Necker who, sure of his reforms, demanded that Louis XVI declare his support for him. Louis XVI refused to do so, and Necker resigned in 1781, provoking considerable public concern at the loss of so able an administrator.

In February 1781, Necker compiled his famous *Compte Rendu* (statement of national accounts). It was the first such document to be published and available to the general public. The statement became a bestseller, precisely because the educated public was by now intensely concerned about the state of the nation's finances. Being a banker (rather than a government minister), Necker understood that France needed to copy the British system of publishing the state of national finances to reassure lenders about the state of France's national budget. Necker well knew that a document that showed a stable government would make financiers more willing to lend money. He therefore reported only on 'ordinary' or usual government revenue and spending, but did not include 'extraordinary' or special spending on large loans taken out mainly to fight wars. In this way, Necker was able to produce convincing figures that France was 10 million pounds in credit.

Necker's second term as Director General of Finances began on 25 August 1788, with the additional status of being appointed a Minister of State. Louis XVI recalled him reluctantly and only out of sheer necessity. Louis XVI was facing a serious financial problem and, behind that, an even greater potential political crisis. The nation's finances were by then in such a bad state that the existing director, Loménie de Brienne,



▲ Source 5.10 Jacques Necker

had needed to announce restrictions on the government's repayment of debts (August 1788). The announcement sent out shock waves about the state of France's finances, and by itself alarmed lenders and creditors, always fearful of state bankruptcy. Worse, by the 1780s, a large part of public opinion had swung to the radical belief that the king must not impose taxes alone, but must consult with public bodies. This was the new theory of 'no taxation without representation'. In particular, the *parlement* of Paris had taken on the role of being a champion of fiscal representation.

Necker took this challenge on because it suited his own political convictions. Coming from democratic Geneva, he had never liked absolute monarchy, and as an admirer of England, he looked to England as a model of how a government led by a king could rule in co-operation with a representative parliament. Like so many other enlightened people in the 1780s, he believed that France, too, would be well served by a constitutional monarchy. He hoped that the Estates-General might provide the first model of a French king working with a representative body. For more information on Necker and the Estates-General, see Chapter 6.



▲ Source 5.11 *The Hope of Happiness Dedicated to the Nation*, c. 1790. In this allegorical painting, Louis XVI and Jacques Necker ride in the ship of France with Goodness and Truth.

## 5.5 The financial crisis becomes a political crisis: The revolt of the notables

**revolt of the notables (aristocratic revolt)** the stage in the revolution when privileged orders resisted the royal government's attempts at fiscal reform

Historians influenced by Marx suggest that the French Revolution unfolded in four distinct stages, progressively drawing different groups of people into conflict with the old regime. The first was loosely called the **revolt of the notables** (or the **aristocratic revolt**), because the privileged orders resisted the royal government's attempts at a fiscal reform of taxes. Their resistance was crucial because the government could not obtain further loans from the international bankers in Amsterdam and London unless these financiers saw that it was supported by the *parlements* or the Assembly of Notables.

The revolt of the notables triggered the French Revolution because, during the period 1788–89, it progressively drew in the bourgeoisie, the urban working classes and the peasants in a multi-class rebellion against the old regime. In this sense, the crisis was not in fact *purely* an aristocratic rebellion, but something much broader.



▲ **Source 5.12** Before and after the revolutionary economic reforms. Left: *The Most Important Persons Would Always Be Walked All Over*, caricature from c. 1789. Right: This engraving shows three estates carrying the national debt together.

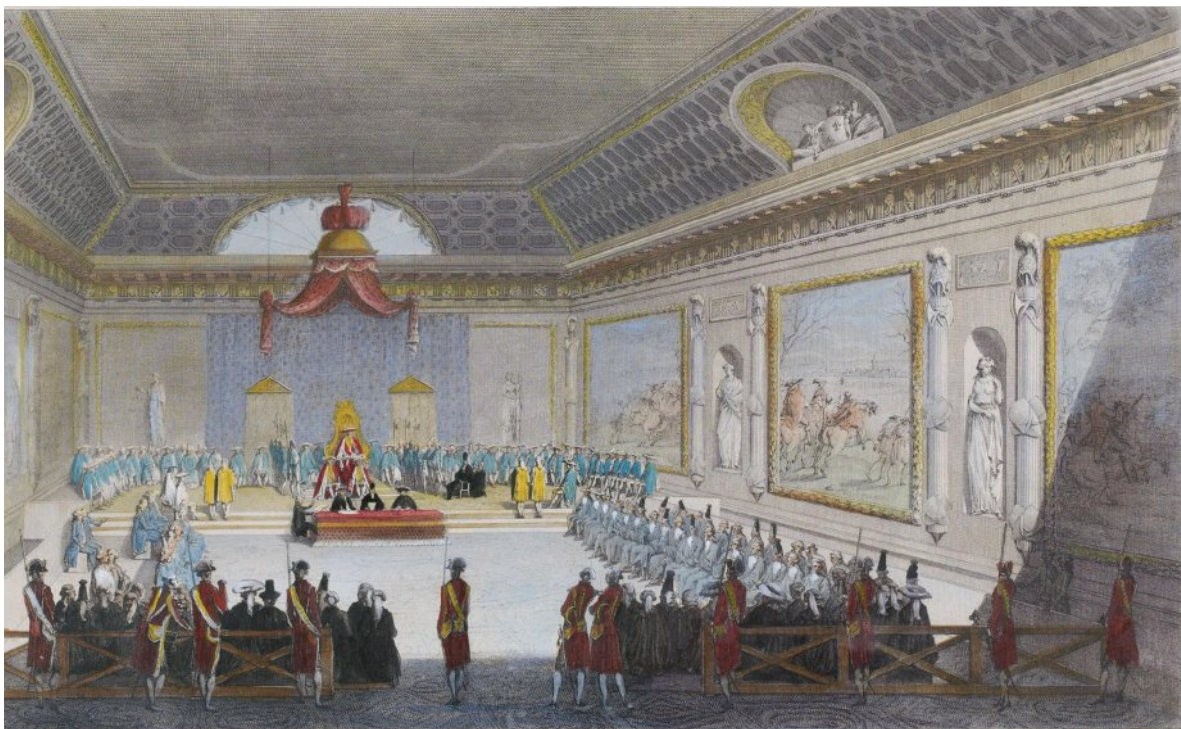
## The Assembly of Notables

French kings requested an Assembly of Notables when they wished to consult the nobility on matters of state; the practice was unusual and only occurred at extraordinary times. The Assembly of Notables first met in 1787 from 22 February to 25 May to discuss Calonne's proposed fiscal reforms. The Assembly of Notables was almost completely noble, including royal princes, high clergy and royal officials. Surprisingly, the assembly supported the principle of equality of taxation in theory, by acknowledging that nobody should have the privilege of not paying tax. The notables supported Calonne's proposal that a representative assembly allocate and collect tax – that is, they accepted the principle of **taxation by representation**. However, they objected to Calonne's land tax because it would fall most heavily on them, so they suggested other models.

**taxation by representation**  
taxes that have been discussed and approved by the elected representatives of the people who are going to have to pay these taxes

Although the meetings of the Assembly of Notables were closed, the situation created feverish speculation; to satisfy public curiosity, information was leaked, revealing how serious France's financial problems were. When the meetings were deadlocked, Calonne used the new tactic of appealing to public opinion through publishing a pamphlet requesting public support and condemning the nobles for their selfish opposition. The notables continued to block Calonne, so Louis XVI dismissed him in April 1787.

The Assembly of Notables was crucial to the development of a revolution, not because the assembly found a solution but because the situation transformed the nation's finances from a state matter into a question of public opinion.



▲ **Source 5.13** This coloured engraving is a representation of the meeting of the Assembly of Notables in 1787.

### FOCUS QUESTIONS 5.3

- 1 How did the Assembly of Notables respond to plans for new and more equal taxes?
- 2 Do you think the Assembly of Notables not providing a solution caused a loss of public confidence in the monarchy?

## Attempted reform by Brienne, May 1787

The new Finance Minister, Loménie de Brienne, made a final attempt at financial reform, retrying Calonne's idea of provincial assemblies calculating and collecting taxes, but modifying the plan to satisfy the notables. They were now more militant, demanding a permanent committee to audit royal spending. The king refused. The Assembly of Notables refused to approve any new taxes, arguing that the only body able to authorise taxes was the Estates-General. Brienne realised that he must close the Assembly of Notables before it caused more concern.

However, the damage was done; the monarchy seemed unable to handle the nation's finances and people were fully aware of the serious problem. Reformers demanded the principle of no taxation without representation; that is, the king could not impose taxes without approval by representatives such as the Estates-General. To continue his financial reforms, but not call the Estates-General, Brienne had to present new laws to the *parlements*. How were they likely to react?

Such resistance to royal authority was dangerous even in closed meetings, but this challenge was being made publicly. The educated and influential people of the salons who discussed national affairs were unanimous that the *parlement* should resist. The political activists of the clubs printed a paper storm of pamphlets. Parisians formed crowds outside the *parlement*.



▲ Source 5.14 Loménie de Brienne, the Finance Minister in 1787, had the difficult task of putting a modified version of Calonne's original plan to the hostile *parlements*.

## The king's new battle with the *parlements*, July 1787



KEY  
EVENT

Brienne's struggle with the *parlements* began in July 1787. He presented a law for a stamp duty to the Paris *parlement*. It refused to register the law, stating that it would pass no laws until it saw the royal accounts. The king stated, correctly, that it had no authority to do so and ordered that the law be registered. The *parlement* retaliated by taking the serious step of disobeying the royal command, stating that it had no authority to sanction **perpetual taxes** and that only the Estates-General could approve new taxes.

**perpetual taxes** taxes occurring over and over

The king feared this new public opinion and ordered the *parlement* to Versailles, where he could demand a registration of the laws. When the *parlement* met in Paris the following day to discuss what it would do, enormous crowds gathered around the Palace of Justice to express their support. The situation was explosive; the king ordered the *parlement* to retire to Troyes. He ordered the police to close political clubs, repress illegal pamphlets, stop gatherings at the Palace of Justice and keep the streets clear at night.

These authoritarian measures worked, giving Brienne time to negotiate with the *parlement*. He offered to abandon the stamp tax and the provincial collection if the *parlements* approved reform to existing laws. They could also examine the royal accounts. Brienne called a royal session of the *parlement* for 17 November 1787 in which the king would sit, but would not order the *parlement* to register the laws. Brienne hoped to pre-arrange agreement to his new laws before the meeting started.

## The disaster of the royal session, November 1787

Brienne began the royal session with acceptable reforms: tough economies for the royal household, collection of taxes by royal officials, and savings in the royal administration and the armed forces. The state would also borrow another £420 million between 1788 and 1792 to solve its financial crisis. Brienne created majority support for reform, although the *parlementaires* still demanded the calling of the Estates-General.

Brienne was close to victory when the king, misunderstanding the situation, ordered the *parlement* to register the laws. The *parlement*, stunned, registered the laws, but after the king's departure, it cancelled them all.



▲ Source 5.15 This image depicts a special meeting of the Paris *parlement*, similar to the one in which Brienne came very close to passing the reforms that might have saved the old regime.

## The monarchy's retreat into authoritarianism

Louis XVI returned to authoritarian measures, using his power of arbitrary arrest to exile three judges, and forbidding the other members of *parlement* to sit. The *parlement* declared the arbitrary arrest unjust. The king ordered their denunciation deleted. The Paris *parlement* bombarded the monarchy with remonstrances, which were published. The provincial *parlements* made many objections, refusing to register any laws whatsoever. The king accused the magistrates of exceeding their power, and they accused him of despotism.

**convoked** called together for a large formal meeting

In this struggle, the judges made a leap in political thought; they redefined the nation, especially 'the right of the Nation freely to grant subsidies (i.e. taxes) through the organ of the Estates-General, regularly **convoked** and composed' (i.e. taxation with representation such as via a parliament). The king ordered the arrest of the two men who had drafted it; they hid in the *parlement*, which met overnight to protect them. The king ordered troops to surround the Palace of Justice and arrest the two culprits, who were taken to provincial prisons.

Louis XVI removed the *parlements'* power of registration and remonstrance, and gave it to special plenary courts, dominated by high notables loyal to him. He then ordered all *parlements* to close indefinitely.

## 5.6 The explosion of popular resistance: The Day of the Tiles

The Day of the Tiles was an important event that took place in 7 June 1788 in the regional city of Grenoble, which had a city government that was sympathetic to liberal and reformist ideas. The Day of the Tiles began as a protest in response to the king's order to the *parlement* to register the May edicts; when the *parlement* did not register, the king attempted to send the members of the *parlement* into exile, but the revolutionary crowd was fully in support of the *parlement's* stance, and took over the centre of the city and the Town Hall. After royal troops were sent in, the crowd retired to the roof of the building and hurled roof tiles onto the soldiers below, with deadly effect – four people were killed and some forty were wounded.



▲ Source 5.16 *La Journée des tuiles en 1788 à Grenoble* (The Day of the Tiles in Grenoble, 1788) by Alexandre Debelle

Similar protests happened elsewhere, such as in the towns of Pau, Toulouse, Besançon, Metz and Dijon. Historian William Doyle describes how the revolutionary crowd in Rennes took over the city for almost two months and the city government could not restore control.

**lettres de cachet** letters or orders for arrest as signed by the king of France and closed with the royal seal

The king responded to these protests by sending out volleys of *lettres de cachet*. Brienne, judging that the situation was uncontrollable, distracted public attention by announcing that he would call the Estates-General.

The Day of the Tiles was the first violent popular demonstration by a crowd in the French Revolution. As such, it was very new and very frightening. Indeed, the lawyers and judges of the *parlement* left the city, hoping to calm the popular unrest. Like many law-abiding people, they were alarmed by the force of the popular action.



With the departure of those connected with the *parlement*, the bourgeoisie of the Third Estate took up the initiative and tried to shift events back to peaceful, constitutional methods. On 14 July 1788, the three estates called a meeting of the three orders and on 21 July they met in the nearby town of Vizille, where they made the radical decision to vote by head instead of by order, and to double the numbers of the Third Estate. This was a major development, because a purely theoretical political idea had been turned into reality – one that offered a credible example to other regions. The leaders of this initiative were Jean Joseph Mounier and Antoine Barnave, and they would represent Grenoble to the Estates-General. This effectively calmed popular radicalism and prevented the recurrence of any more violence.

However, in August 1788, the French nation slid suddenly into bankruptcy and the treasury suspended all payments. Brienne was obliged to call the Estates-General for 1 May 1789.



▲ Source 5.17 *Assemblée de Vizille* by Alexandre Debelle

#### FOCUS QUESTIONS 5.4

- 1 Why did the *parlements* resist Brienne's tax reforms?
- 2 Why did the popular movement in Paris and other cities turn out to defend the *parlements* with such violence?

## 5.7 The Books of Grievances

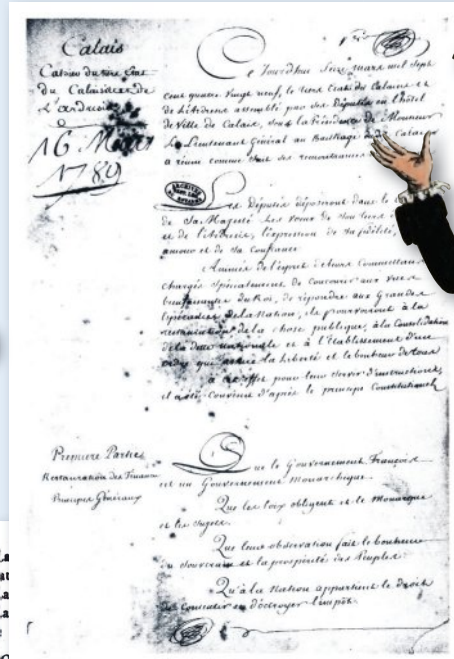
The calling of the Estates-General required the election of deputies and the drafting of **Books of Grievances** (*Cahiers de Doléances*) to be presented at Versailles. These were not demands but respectful statements of concerns to the king, who would respond as he wished. The meeting was purely advisory and lacked the authority of a truly representative body.

The most important aspect of these preparations was the process whereby nearly everybody in France participated in writing the grievances; people within each of

**Books of Grievances** (*Cahiers de Doléances*) lists of concerns drawn up by local meetings of the Three Estates across France before the meeting of the Estates-General in May 1789



1 Local drafts in many small communities



2 Drafts in towns

La  
ducat  
La  
La  
ville

OBSERVATIONS PRELIMINAIRES.

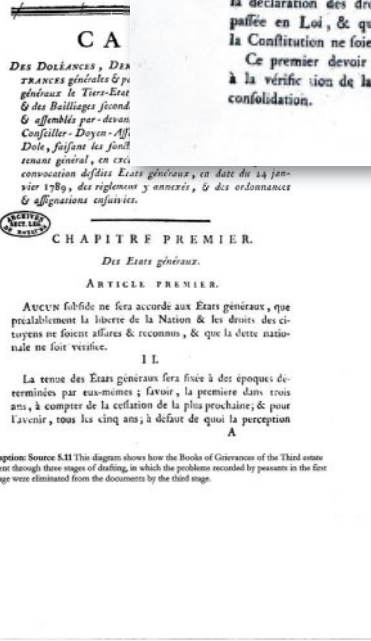
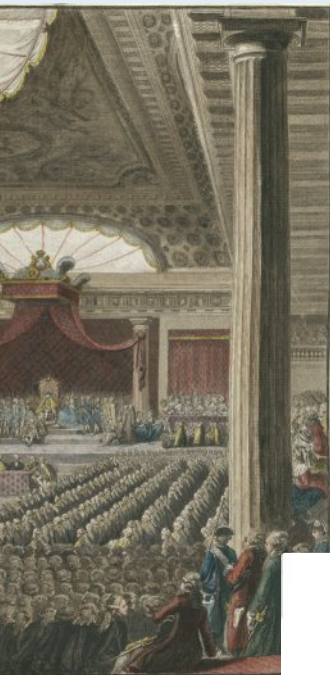
Nous prescrivons à nos Représentans de se refuser invinciblement à tout ce qui pourroit offenser la dignité de Citoyens libres, qui viennent exercer les droits souverains de la Nation. L'opinion publique paroît avoir reconnu la nécessité de la délibération par tête, pour corriger les inconvéniens de la distinction des ordres; pour faire prédominer l'esprit public, pour rendre plus facile l'adoption des bonnes Loix. Les Représentans de la ville de Paris se souviendront de la fermeté qu'ils doivent apporter sur ce point; ils la regarderont comme un droit rigoureux, comme l'objet d'un mandat spécial. Il leur est enjoint expressément de ne consentir à aucun subside, à aucun emprunt, que la déclaration des droits de la Nation ne soit passée en Loi, & que les bases premières de la Constitution ne soient convenues & assurées. Ce premier devoir rempli, ils procéderont à la vérification de la dette publique, & à sa consolidation.

THE THIRD ESTATE (THE COMMONERS)

A multi-stage drafting of their Book of Grievances



3 Drafts in large cities



Caption: Source 8.11 This diagram shows how the Books of Grievances of the Third estate went through three stages of drafting, in which the problems recorded by peasants in the first stage were eliminated from the documents by the third stage.

the three orders stated concerns and suggested solutions. The Books of Grievances are important because they reveal the political, social and economic concerns of the French people at this point in time. The process of requesting advice arguably created new expectations among all social groups, especially the working classes.

The importance of these documents lies not in the result but in the *process* by which they were created. Who wrote them and whose grievances did they represent? Do they give a true picture of the grievances of the French nation in 1789 or just of the people who controlled the writing of the books?

The process of drafting certainly *appeared* to be open and fair. The books were composed by meetings elected by nearly universal

**suffrage** the right to vote

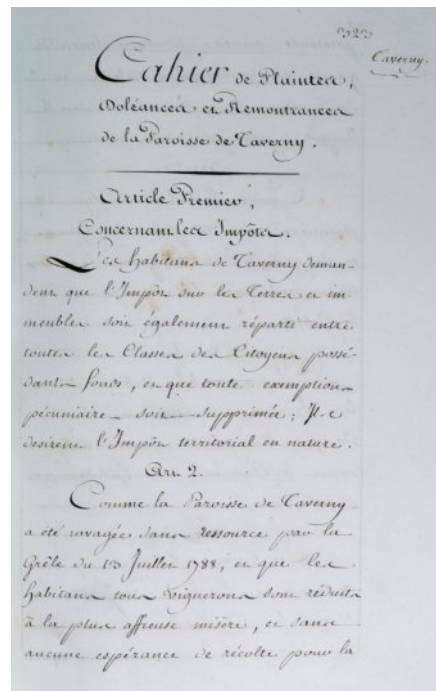
(male) **suffrage**. Meetings of the clergy

were open to all members of the Catholic clergy. Meetings of the nobility were open to all nobles who were over the age of 25 years and had acquired transmissible nobility. Meetings of the Third Estate were open to all French people of common birth who were over 25 years of age and paid some tax. Only the poor were excluded.

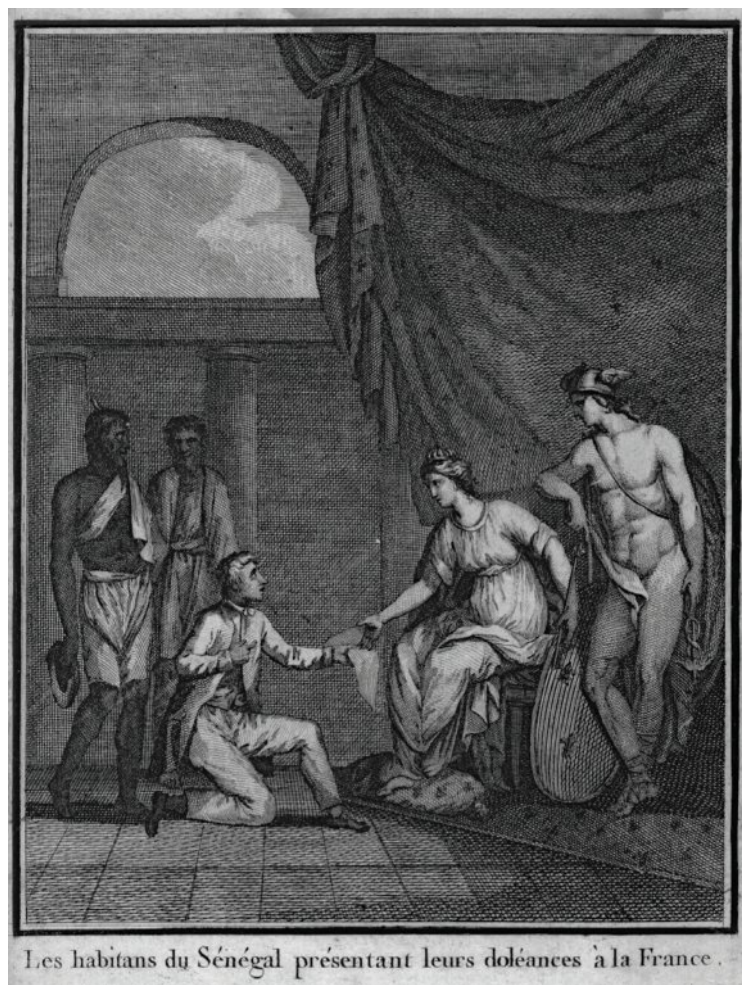
For the nobles, the process was a simple one-stage affair: they went to the local town, elected the deputies and wrote their list of grievances. Generally, they did not elect minor court nobility or liberal nobles.

The clergy completed a relatively simple two-stage process: initial meetings were held in religious chapters and orders, then delegates were sent to the local town, where they held a second meeting to choose the representatives for Versailles. When the high clergy controlled the process, they wrote a conservative document defending the privileges of the Catholic Church. When village priests controlled the process, the document contained more liberal suggestions.

► **Source 5.20** This engraving represents the idea of the Books of Grievances as respectful subjects humbly making their problems known to France, represented by the seated woman.



▲ **Source 5.19** The *Cahier de Doléances* of the parish of Taverny



Les habitans du Sénégal présentant leurs doléances à la France.

## The Third Estate: A multi-stage process gives dominance to educated people

The real problem arose with the Third Estate, which was larger and included an illiterate majority (the peasants) who relied on local bourgeois to write the documents for them. The drafting of the Third Estate **dossiers** extended to two, three or even four stages, during which certain grievances were filtered out. Initial meetings in thousands of French villages produced preliminary dossiers, focusing on the local, material peasant grievances, such as feudal dues. But, these preliminary dossiers went to a second meeting, where a selection of delegates was made and all the local grievances were summarised into one dossier. Not a single peasant or artisan got beyond this first stage of selecting representatives.

**dossiers** sets of papers containing information

The delegates for the Third Estate met in the local town, where the books were merged into one document and deputies to Versailles were elected. Here, an educated middle class usually dominated proceedings and altered the information, eliminating local peasant grievances about the feudal system and focusing on national issues such as the nation's finances. The final 'general grievances' were not a representation of the Third Estate as a whole, but of the political concerns of educated and wealthy bourgeois.

These grievances, therefore, represented town over country, bourgeois over peasant, and property owner over the poor. Millions of peasants had stated their grievances to Louis XVI, but he would never hear them.



▲ **Source 5.21** The taking down of grievances of peasants and artisans in a French village. The majority of these would be ignored by the second draft of the dossier.

### The peasants' grievances are eliminated

Most peasants, being illiterate, had to express their concerns to the local lawyer or even the lord himself. There was miscommunication, resulting first from misunderstanding and second from powerful local figures silencing complaints. Historian Annie Moulin describes local officials who 'interpreted, perhaps even concealed, the real intentions of those tongue-tied and illiterate peasants who voiced their grievances'.

In Pouillenay, for example, the first book – which was dictated by the peasants themselves – described material grievances, including abuses by the local lord. The second – written by an educated person familiar with broader national issues of political and financial reforms – eliminated these peasant grievances and their damning criticism of the lord. There is also evidence of intimidation. The grievances of Frenelle-la-Grande were pre-written for the peasants by an educated person; however, these peasants rejected the false book of grievances and wrote their own.

In general, the grievances of the three orders agreed most on political and administrative reform.



ANALYSIS ACTIVITY 5.1: READING A PRIMARY RESOURCE



The Book of Grievances of Paris' Third Estate

The following extract is from the Third Estate's Book of Grievances in Paris.

*We order our representatives to firmly refuse anything that might offend the dignity of free citizens, who are coming to exercise the sovereign rights of the nation.*

*Public opinion appears to have recognised the necessity of voting by head, to correct the problems caused by the distinctions between the orders, to allow public spirit to triumph, to better enable the adoption of good laws.*

*[The representatives] are specifically asked to not agree to any tax until the declaration of the rights of the nation is made into law, and that the first principles of the constitution are agreed and guaranteed.*

*All power comes from the nation and may only be exercised for its wellbeing.*

*The general will makes the law; the public force ensures that it is put into action.*

*The nation alone can vote a tax; it has the right to determine its size, to limit its duration, to decide its distribution, to determine its use, to demand to see accounts and to have them published.*

*Every citizen has a right to be admitted to all employments, professions and honours.*

*The judicial power must be carried out in France in the name of the king, by courts made up of individuals who are absolutely independent of any executive influence.*

Source 5.22 Translated from the French by Michael Adcock

- 1 Why is the first instruction in this document a challenge to the old culture of deference in France?
- 2 Why do these deputies believe voting by head rather than by order is necessary?
- 3 According to these deputies, where does sovereignty (political authority and power) come from?
- 4 What did these deputies understand by the term 'the general will'?
- 5 How do these deputies intend to control taxation and to ensure that it is fair?
- 6 How do these deputies try to ensure that, in future, it will be personal merit rather than noble birth that will secure employment?
- 7 How have the writings of Montesquieu (see Chapter 3) influenced the deputies' thoughts about the legal system (or judiciary)?

AMAZING BUT TRUE ...

The revolutionary spirit lives on in the *gilet jaunes* (yellow vest) protestors, who continue the tradition of compiling and submitting their grievances to this day!



► Source 5.23 *Gilet jaunes* protestors form a queue to submit their grievances

## Political reform: The attack on absolute royal power

There was broad agreement that the monarch's absolute legislative power should be modified. Laws should be made by a national representative assembly that met regularly. The king should participate in this law-making and should be the head of executive government. In Dourdan, for example, clergy, nobles and the Third Estate agreed that the legislative power should reside collectively in the hands of the king and the nation. They called for the Estates-General to meet regularly.

## Administrative reform

People agreed that centralised administration was inefficient and that it was better handled by regular meetings of provincial assemblies. They would supervise tax collecting in their areas, as well as the spending of revenue on important local projects like roads and bridges. Such bodies already existed in the form of provincial estates. There was also general agreement that France should abolish the venal public office. France had some 50 000 such public servants, who were accountable to no one. The Books of Grievances further recommended that public servants be paid by the government and be accountable to the public.



▲ Source 5.24 Versailles was the centre of political power in France and a symbol of absolute monarchy

## Legal and judicial reform

There was general agreement on legal and judicial reform. People wanted a uniform, efficient and fair judicial system, involving a streamlining of the many existing courts. They also demanded that the law act with more humanity and with more respect for the rights of the accused.

Some demanded basic 'rights', which could mean the **inviolability** of the person, the inviolability of property and even freedom of speech. The demand for the abolition of *lettres de cachet* was unanimous.

**inviolability** that which is unable to be breached or broken

## Fiscal reform

There was strong agreement on taxation. The Third Estate was crushed by the taxation burden, while the two privileged orders, whose members commanded massive wealth, paid relatively little tax. Lawyers and bureaucrats knew that once people stopped paying taxes, it would be difficult to make them resume, so they insisted that everybody continue paying taxes until fairer ones were designed. They also insisted that the only legal taxes were those voted by the whole nation and for a specific period of time; taxes had to be renegotiated and renewed at the end of their term. Finally, as prudent administrators, they knew that they must control the source of money *and* its destination; they demanded national control of spending, as well as the raising of new government loans and all other forms of expenditure, including the gifts and grants the king distributed.

There was less agreement about who should pay taxes and in what proportion. Everybody agreed on removing taxes such as the labour tax (*corvée*), which obliged peasants to work mending local roads. There was agreement on the abolition of the internal tax barriers and the salt tax (*gabelle*). These tax barriers divided whole regions of France; others surrounded the large cities – Paris was surrounded by a set of walls and all goods, including food, had to pass through taxation gates.

*corvée* under the old regime, a labour tax paid by working people

*gabelle* during the old regime, a tax on salt, an item crucial to working people for preserving food and for the care of farm animals

## The nobility more 'revolutionary' than the bourgeoisie?

Recent research by historians Chartier and Taylor dramatically changed our understanding of the Books of Grievances. The Third Estate *did not* write the most 'revolutionary' books; the privileged orders *did not* solely protect their own interests. Of 270 noble deputies, one-third were liberals who demanded reforms in common with those of the Third Estate. The demand for a constitution before any further taxes could be approved appeared in 57 per cent of Third Estate books, but also in 64 per cent of noble books.



► **Source 5.25** A satirical cartoon, depicting a woman's wig so large that it is able to smuggle a cow through Paris' taxation gates!



## 5.8

## SIGNIFICANT INDIVIDUAL



## Philippe, Duc d'Orléans (1747–1793)

Philippe, Duc d'Orléans was a member of the royal family who had lost favour with Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette. When refused an appointment as admiral, he turned against the monarchy. His example proves that early revolutionary leaders often came from the upper ranks of society, not from the lower ranks. He joined the Society of Thirty, which suggested a constitutional monarchy like that of England.

These 'constitutionalists' used their money to encourage writers to produce pamphlets on political reform, among them the Abbé Sieyès. The Duc d'Orléans had a group of supporters known as the Orléans faction, and there was some talk in Paris that he might have had the personal ambition of overthrowing Louis XVI and taking the throne in a constitutional monarchy himself.

The Duc d'Orléans' opened up his buildings of the Palais-Royal to radical speakers, who were then free of police interference, because the police were not allowed to enter a royal property. Much of the 'patriot' agitation occurred here, culminating in Desmoulins' call to arms on 12 July 1789. The Duc d'Orléans later caused a scandal at the opening of the Estates-General when he broke ranks with the nobles and tried to march with the Third Estate (May 1789). This symbolic act gave the impression that even the powerful no longer agreed with the monarchy.



▲ Source 5.26 Louis Philippe Joseph d'Orléans, as painted by Antoine François Callet



► Source 5.27 Philippe rapidly became a hero of the patriot movement, as we see in the image representing the Duc d'Orléans and the Marquis de Lafayette carrying Necker on high.

## THE STORY SO FAR



By the time the Books of Grievances had been completed, early in 1789, France's fiscal crisis was public knowledge and so was the fact that the government had tried to reform itself but failed. Millions of people had experienced the process of writing plans for reform. Although these were just respectful suggestions, not revolutionary demands, people still expected some response to their proposals. Otherwise, the disappointment would itself become a revolutionary factor.

Use the QR code or visit the Interactive Textbook and watch the video summarising the chapter.



## Develop your historical-thinking skills

### Define key terms

Write your own definition of each of the following key terms:

- Assembly of Notables
- taxation by representation
- Books of Grievances.

### Analysing cause and consequence

- 1 Explain why the process of drafting the Books of Grievances of the Third Estate in three stages almost always had the effect of filtering out the local grievances of ordinary working people. Why would this tend to create new and serious grievances among working people?
- 2 Explain why the issue of voting in the Estates-General – by order or by head – was crucial to the outcome of the debate on the reform of taxation.

### Constructing historical arguments

‘The Books of Grievances were not intended to cause the revolution, but the demands they made were nonetheless revolutionary in their thinking and their implications.’ To what extent do you agree with this evaluation of the Books of Grievances?

### Using historical terms meaningfully

Write an extended paragraph explaining how attempts to resolve the national debt by taxation reform only led to greater political divisions in France and, ultimately, to protests and violence. Use the following phrases and terms to show you understand their meaning and context:

- the size and nature of the national debt
- Madame Deficit
- Turgot’s warning
- Necker’s *Compte Rendu*
- Calonne’s proposals
- Assembly of Notables
- Brienne’s proposals
- royal session
- popular support of *parlements*
- Books of Grievances.

## Analysing historian's interpretations

### Jocelyn Hunt (1944–)

Historian Jocelyn Hunt evaluates the crisis of 1789 in these terms:

*Thus the privileged classes both prevented the crown from solving its financial problems and escalated these problems into a full-scale revolution. On the other hand, the vocal and belligerent response of the prosperous and educated members of the Third Estate, and the pro-reform attitudes of some of the nobles are also significant factors. Nobles had resisted the king in every century of French history, without the far-reaching repercussions experienced in the 1780s and 1790s.*

Source 5.28 Jocelyn Hunt, *The French Revolution*, 1998, p. 6



- 1 How exactly did the privileged orders prevent the old regime from solving its financial problems?
- 2 Apart from the privileged orders, who else helped to drive the fiscal crisis into a political crisis?
- 3 If nobles had resisted French kings before, why did this act of resistance turn into rebellion and then full revolution?

◀ Source 5.29 Jocelyn Hunt's *The French Revolution* (1998)

## Using quotes as evidence

Write a sentence using a short phrase from one of the quotes below or contrast the views from a few of the quotes. You can also use any of the quotes in the chapter. Any quotes you choose can be used directly or paraphrased into your own words.

[The Assembly of Notables] marked the beginning of a political crisis that could only be resolved by revolution.


**William Doyle, historian**

*The French Revolution of 1789 was the product of medium-term political and financial crises within the state and the destabilising efforts to resolve them.*

**Nigel Aston, historian**

*During the crisis of 1787–88, the public was given a more articulate voice, that of the Press. [...] Public opinion was on the march. During the next twelve months, hundreds of thousands of starving and unemployed French men and women would be recruited ... as economic recession and harvest failure transformed a political crisis into a political and social revolution.*

**Gwynne Lewis, historian**



# 6 HOW THE POLITICAL CRISIS BECAME A REVOLUTION, 1789

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*If the nation was sovereign, the king no longer was.*

—WILLIAM DOYLE, 2001

## Overview

The French monarchy's tragedy was that every attempt to resolve its crisis only worsened the situation. The meeting of the Estates-General in May 1789 triggered a new and specifically political crisis. Any debate over taxation would set the Third Estate against the two privileged estates; the method of voting would be crucial.



By now, radical ideas were developing rapidly; as the Estates-General deadlocked over the issue of voting by order or voting by head, intellectual leaders used revolutionary pamphlets to publicise radical new ideas. Among hundreds of pamphlets, one in particular proposed that since the Third Estate was virtually all of the nation, its deputies were really representatives of France. The representatives of the Third Estate, supported finally by some liberal clergy and nobles, finally took the momentous step of declaring themselves the 'national' assembly.

## Key issues

- What were the hopes and grievances of working people in the 1780s?
- Why was there conflict over the Estates-General in May 1789?
- Who was Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès?
- What was the significance of the Tennis Court Oath?
- Who was Jean-Sylvain Bailly?
- Why was Paris in a ferment in July 1789?
- Who was Camille Desmoulins?

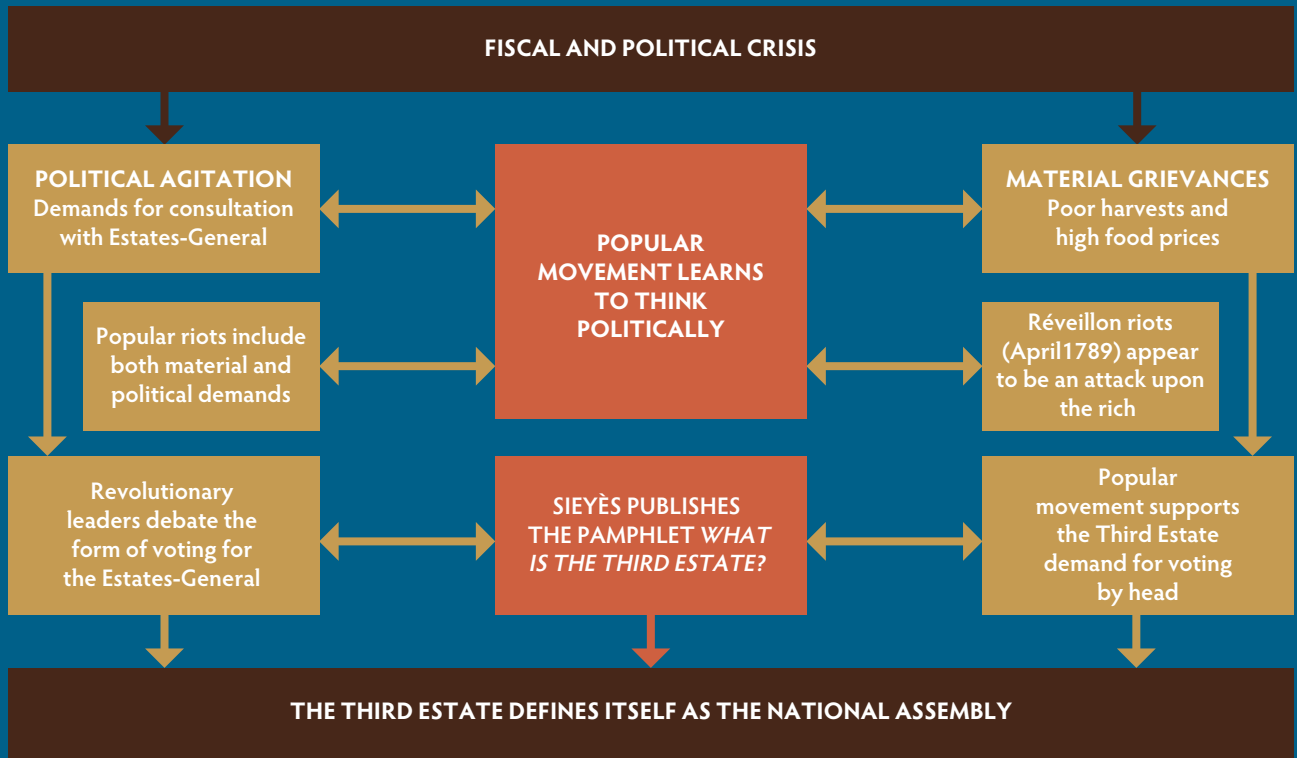
## Digital resources for this chapter

In the *Interactive Textbook*:

-  video and audio sources and questions
-  digital activities.

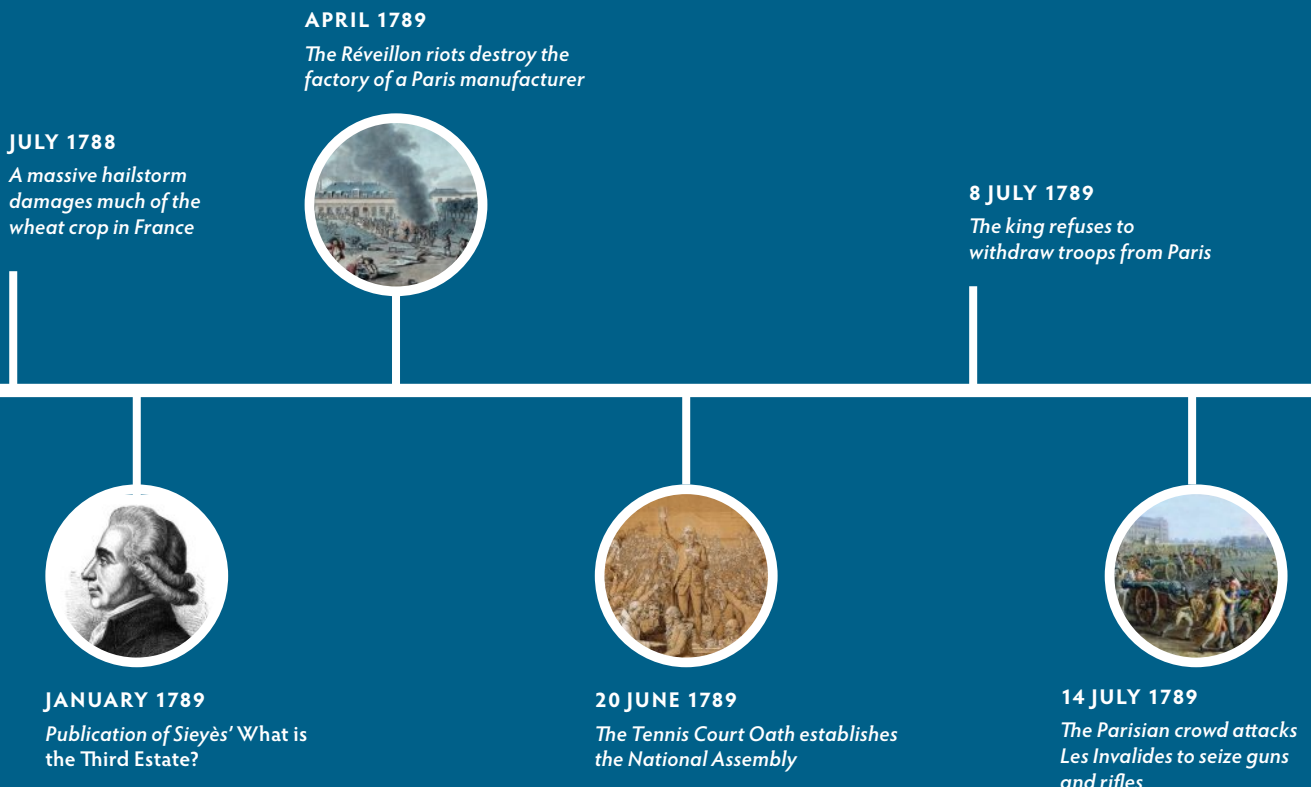
◀ **Source 6.0** Nineteenth-century painter Auguste Couder's depiction of the Tennis Court Oath, 20 June 1789

# Flow of chapter



90

# Chapter timeline



## 6.1 Mounting grievances: The harvest crisis and concerns over the *parlements*

The calling of the Estates-General and the drafting of Books of Grievances were intended to resolve France's fiscal and political crisis; instead, they worsened it. Historian Alexis de Tocqueville argues that the most dangerous time for a regime is not the centuries when it controls its people, but the moment when it attempts reform. The calling of the Estates-General created a surge of optimism.

This process of raising a people's hopes can be dangerous even in stable, prosperous times. But France in the 1780s was not prosperous. Evidence for this comes from the English economist Arthur Young, who travelled through France observing conditions in the countryside. He asked a peasant woman what she thought the Estates-General might do. She replied that she did not know exactly, but whatever it did, it should be an improvement because things could not be any worse. This shows that when people do not know what to expect, they tend to expect everything.



▲ **Source 6.1** This engraving depicts a procession for the opening of the Estates-General, showing the vast number of people involved.

### The harvest crisis and food shortages, 1788 and 1789

On 13 July 1788, a savage storm devastated the ripe wheat crops in the Paris basin region, as well as damaging other crops, such as apples and olives, in other regions. The resulting shortage of grain sent the price of bread climbing. In the year to July 1789, the price of bread increased steadily to the highest level in Louis XVI's reign: twice what it had cost in 1787. The typical family of urban workers usually spent 30–50 per cent of their income on bread; a poor peasant family spent more. Now, the same families were spending 65–90 per cent of income on this basic food. If bread prices rose further, starvation threatened.

The rural depression affected the urban industrial economy; demand for consumer goods, and hence industrial activity, fell by 50 per cent. The effects were most strongly felt in Paris and large industrial towns such as Rouen, Lyon and Nîmes. In Lyon, for example, there were 30 000 unemployed silk workers.



▲ **Source 6.2** This painting by Debucourt represents Les Halles marketplace in Paris in about 1791. This was the type of place where the success of the revolution would be decided; the 'politics of food' was the main driving force of the popular revolutionary movement.

## Popular anger at reforming ministers: Working people associate their grievances with national policy

During the winter of 1788–89, working people linked their material problems with current political issues. Hungry workers understood that reforming ministers had removed price controls on grain, causing price increases. Unemployed urban workers now understood that ministers had removed restrictions on the import of manufactured goods from Britain, reducing sales of French products. The result of this new association of grievances is evident in the scene depicted in Girardet's *Attack on a Guardhouse on the Pont Neuf, August 9, 1788* (see Source 6.3).



◀ **Source 6.3** During the popular disturbances of 1788–89, the crowd attacked the customs houses around Paris, then attacked symbols of authority, such as this police station. Here, the crowd burns dummies of Calonne and the other reformers.



## FOCUS QUESTIONS 6.1

- 1 Why was the positive idea of consulting the nation in the Books of Grievances likely to create even greater problems?
- 2 In what sense can it be said that working people in France in the 1780s learned to think politically about their traditional problems?

Working people demanded the recall of Necker, who now became associated in the popular mind with the **pragmatism** and determination of the reform-minded Third Estate. Both his recall in August 1788 and any later dismissal would hold enormous significance for working people. This was the final stage of the ‘birth of public opinion’: workers understood that government decisions would affect their lives directly.

**pragmatism** a practical way of thinking about things

## Popular agitation over the *parlements*

The second element to this explosive situation was the involvement of urban workers in the escalating battle between the king and the *parlements*. Workers saw no division between national affairs and their own material concerns. When the many *parlements* closed, thousands of minor officials and clerical workers were unemployed, and they led the crowds that demanded the return of the *parlements*.

Necker ordered the immediate return of the Paris *parlement* in September 1788. This did not calm the situation; rioting and bloodshed continued and the Paris judges themselves forbade further disorder. In October, all the provincial *parlements* were reopened. In provincial cities, large crowds welcomed the magistrates back, comparing them with the **martyred** senators of ancient Rome.

**martyred** when someone is killed for refusing to deny a strong belief



◀ **Source 6.4** This engraving is a representation of the popular enthusiasm of working people for the judges of the *parlements*, who they saw as heroes standing up to royal despotism.



## 6.2 The Réveillon riots

In April 1789, a new incident terrified Parisians because it suggested the beginning of a class conflict between rich and poor. The victim was the owner of the Réveillon wallpaper factory, who actually paid his workers well. He innocently commented that bread prices should be reduced so that poor workers could afford food. In the highly charged atmosphere, this was misinterpreted as suggesting that *wages* should be brought down. Angry crowds entirely destroyed his house and factory on 27 April 1789. The French Guards fired on the crowd, killing 25 people, which was exaggerated to 300 through rumour.



◀ Source 6.5  
Pillaging of  
the Réveillon  
wallpaper  
factory



◀ Source 6.6  
The riots at  
Réveillon were  
one of the first  
instances of  
violence during  
the French  
Revolution.

Was this an urban crowd responding to the political principles of 1789, or were the people expressing the economic and social grievances of labourer against capitalist? In likelihood, both causes are plausible. The crowds' slogans contained political comments in favour of Necker and the Third Estate, as well as slogans such as 'Down with the rich', which is clear evidence that the poorer elements of society were motivated by economic grievances. This sense of class conflict is confirmed by the way the **propertied classes** behaved, because the leaders of the revolution formed a militia of responsible citizens to be ready to stop the crowd if it again threatened private property.

**propertied classes** those who own property

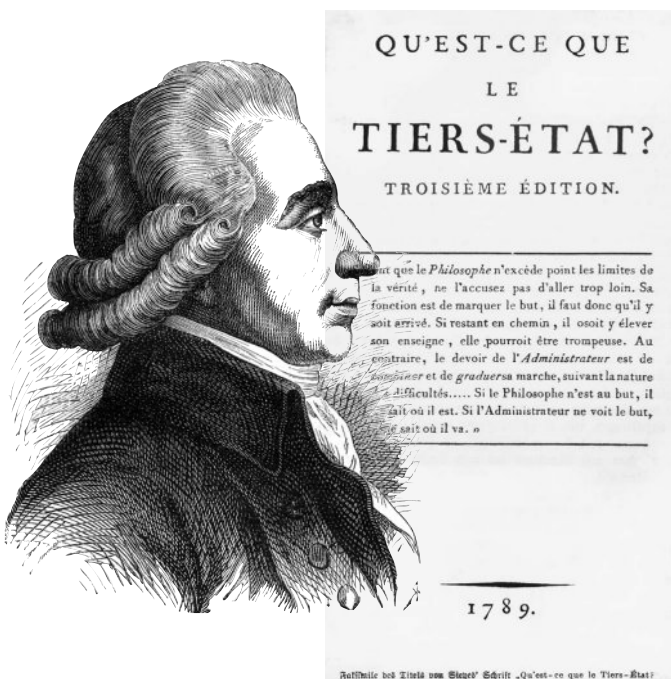
## 6.3 The pamphlet war

One of the strongest short-term influences on public opinion before the revolution was the flurry of political publications known as 'the pamphlet war'. The use of pamphlets was perfectly legal: French law allowed the free publication of pamphlets before any meeting of the Estates-General. This was so that the deputies could have access to points of view and factual information regarding the issues they would be discussing. The definition of a pamphlet is quite broad, but it is generally taken to mean a short publication (usually, but not always, shorter than a book) discussing some important issue of the day.

The birth of public opinion in France had been developing throughout the eighteenth century, but the financial crisis of 1787–88 had intensified public interest in the nation's affairs to a fever pitch. During the pamphlet war, some 4000 pamphlets were published and eagerly read. Some printers published political cartoons to communicate their ideas visually to people who were illiterate. In some cases, vast amounts of money were spent. For example, Philippe, Duc d'Orléans, used the enormous wealth from his shopping precinct at the Palais-Royal to commission writers to produce a pamphlet. He and other members of the Society of Thirty might well have dictated their political ideas to the writers. Evidence of their impact is in the response to the most famous pamphlet of all: Abbé Sieyès' *What is the Third Estate?* This publication was not the only pamphlet to boldly argue that the deputies of the Third Estate were the representatives of the nation, but it was the most forceful.

*What is the Third Estate?* was a pioneering work that would not have appeared without the patronage of the Duc d'Orléans. Sieyès had previously published pamphlets without success when the duke approached

him and offered a substantial sum of money for a new work. The body of 4000 pamphlets worked like an agent to form and to unify people's thoughts about the political and social system, as well as the great issues of debt and tax reform.



◀ **Source 6.7** The Abbé Sieyès and his most important work, *What is the Third Estate?*

## 6.4 Events at the Estates-General

### The 'bourgeois' revolution, 1788–89

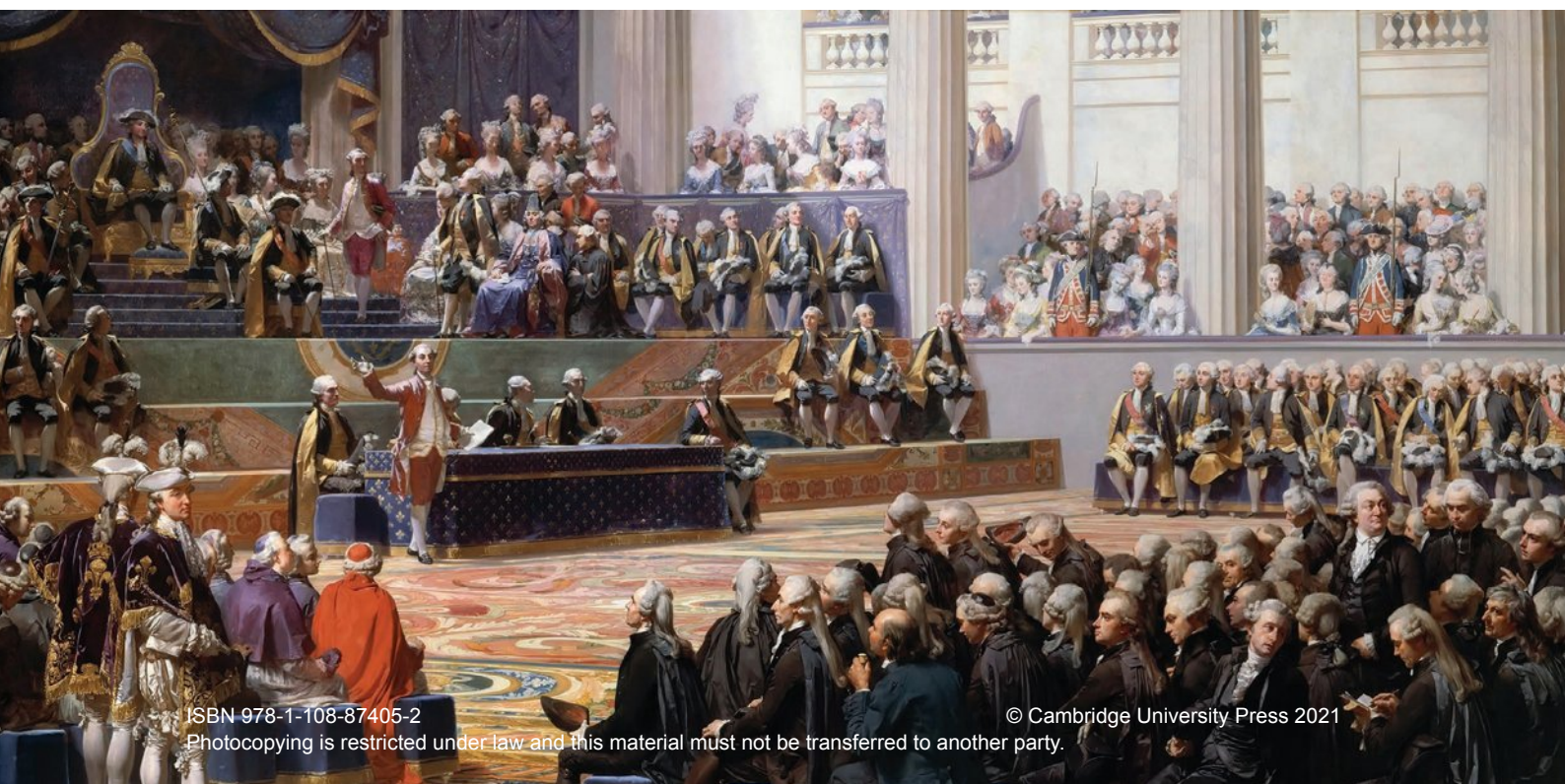
The calling of the Estates-General was seen as the solution to the nation's financial crisis, yet its convocation only complicated the political crisis. Clearly, the organisation of the Estates-General would influence who controlled it. At the last meeting in 1614, the three orders had met in three roughly equal groups, meaning that the two privileged minority orders were over-represented compared with the large Third Estate. Worse, they voted by order, so everything discussed was decided by three votes – one for each estate. If this system was used in 1789, the first and second estates would always outvote the third, making every decision a victory for privilege.

### The alternative method of doubling the Third Estate

There was another voting model: the provincial assembly, which had been established in many provinces in 1778–87. To recognise the size of the Third Estate, its numbers were doubled, and voting was by head, not by order. The radical provincial Assembly of Vizille now suggested that this system of voting should be used at the Estates-General. The reforming minister, Brienne, approved this suggestion, but he fell from power before he could go further. Nonetheless, this important alternative method of voting was better suited to the realities of eighteenth-century society.

Radical writers churned out pamphlets recommending the precedent of the provincial Assembly of Vizille, which was also known as the Estates-General of Dauphiné. Nobles still demanded voting by order; the judges of the *parlements*, too, pronounced in favour of the old system. But, they misjudged public opinion, because their recent popularity as champions of the people evaporated immediately. The pamphleteers raged that voting by order was a deliberate plot by the privileged orders to keep the Third Estate under control. Anybody who spoke in favour of the old system was self-evidently part of the plot. Outside the privileged orders, public opinion agreed that voting should be by head and the Third Estate should have double the number of deputies.

▼ **Source 6.8** This image is a later representation of the meeting of the Estates-General, painted in 1839 by the historical artist Auguste Couder.



## Necker's fatal indecision, December 1788

The debate continued from September until December 1788, until Necker finally made half a decision. He doubled the Third Estate, but tried to please the privileged estates by refusing voting by head. Necker weakly suggested that the Estates-General might decide what to do when it met and said he hoped it would agree to deliberate in common. He gave each estate the hope of a successful outcome, but also created a serious issue to be resolved.

Observers in December 1788 were surprised at how much the political atmosphere had changed. The original political and constitutional debate was still there; enlightened people still opposed despotism and absolute royal power, and still wanted royal power moderated by a parliamentary body. They also still believed in taxation with representation. To these ideas was now added a social challenge. The wealthy Third Estate deputies dominated the political discussion, while the poorer members of the Third Estate discovered their physical power on the streets of Paris. The attack upon the king's absolute power revealed hidden resentments against the privileged position of the first two estates. Members of the Third Estate now realised that they were no longer struggling with one enemy, but with three.

### FOCUS QUESTIONS 6.2

- 1 Why was the question of the method of voting in the Estates-General of such crucial importance by 1789?
- 2 How did people want to change the system of voting so that it was better suited to the France of 1789?

## 6.5

### SIGNIFICANT INDIVIDUAL



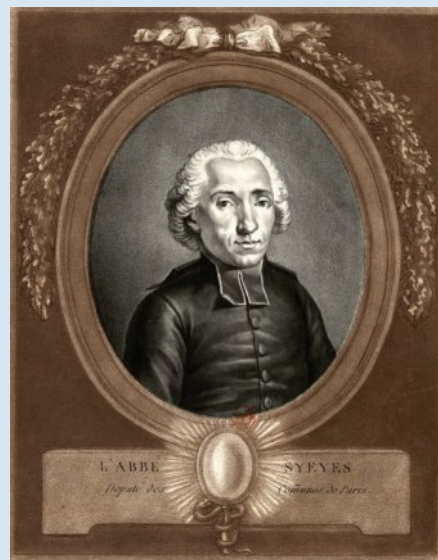
#### Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès (1748–1836)

The political debate was transformed by an intellectual leader, Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès – also known as Abbé Sieyès, whose single revolutionary idea propelled discussion forward.

Sieyès' pamphlet, *What is the Third Estate?*, hit the revolutionary scene in January 1789 like a bombshell. It lashed out at the privileged orders and questioned how genuine they had been in making concessions. The pamphlet claimed that the Third Estate was so numerically and economically important that it was not just a large part of the nation, but it virtually *was* the nation.

Until then, the Third Estate was defined negatively: its members were 'commoners', identified because they were *not* noble or privileged. Sieyès reversed centuries of social perception. He described the Third Estate as representing the substance of the nation and the privileged orders were defined negatively because they serve no useful purpose. He followed this idea to its logical conclusion; that is, there was no point in meeting as estates as all. The Third Estate should constitute itself independently as an assembly of the nation – in effect, a parliament.

What were the motives and ideas driving this revolutionary leader? Sieyès represented the capable, talented commoner, who rose as far as possible by his merit, then hit the ceiling created by his common birth. Ordained in 1773, he rose to become Chancellor of the Diocese of Chartres, but went no further. He was no democrat, and he was frosty and ill at ease with his social inferiors and with women. Sieyès was also not a great speaker because his voice was soft and his manner was restrained. By 1788, he had concluded that the king could never overcome the selfish interests of the anti-reform nobles. He published two pamphlets, unsuccessfully, then prepared to emigrate to America. However, his third pamphlet guaranteed his revolutionary career.



▲ Source 6.9 Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès, also known as Abbé Sieyès



ANALYSIS ACTIVITY 6.1: READING A PRIMARY SOURCE



The revolutionary leader and a revolutionary idea

The following is an extract from *What is the Third Estate?*

*The plan of this document is quite simple. We have three questions to ask ourselves:*

- 1 *What is the third Estate? Everything.*
- 2 *What has it been up until now in the political order? Nothing.*
- 3 *What does it demand? To be something.*

*We shall see whether these responses are correct. ... Who then would dare say that the Third Estate does not contain everything that is necessary to form a complete nation? The Third estate is [like] a strong, healthy man whose arms are still in chains. If we took away the privileged order, the nation would not be reduced, but made stronger. This, what is the Third [Estate]? Everything, but an everything that is limited and repressed. What would it be without the privileged order? Everything, but an everything [that would be] free and flourishing. Nothing can work without it, everything would go infinitely better without the other [orders]. The Third [Estate] thus includes everything that constitutes the nation; and everything that is not of the Third [Estate] cannot consider itself as being of the nation. What is the Third Estate? Everything.*

Source 6.10 Abbé Sieyès, *What is the Third Estate?*, January 1789

- 1 This revolutionary leader has the skill of reducing complicated debates into short, sharp, memorable phrases. Why is Sieyès' introduction so effective?
- 2 Why was it so radical, in 1789, to state that the Third Estate was a nation, instead of saying that it was part of a nation?
- 3 Why does Sieyès place such value on the Third Estate?
- 4 Why do you think Sieyès refers to the two privileged estates as one ('the privileged order')?
- 5 To what extent has Sieyès based his argument on the Enlightenment idea of social usefulness and merit?
- 6 According to Sieyès, which two important principles would support the triumph of the Third Estate?



◀ Source 6.11 *It Won't Last Forever*, eighteenth-century engraving. This satirical cartoon shows a peasant, representing the Third Estate, carrying a heavy load while a member of the clergy and a noble, representing the other two estates, watch.

## ANALYSIS ACTIVITY 6.2: READING A PRIMARY SOURCE



### A triumphant image of the Third Estate

Sieyès' new definition of the nature and significance of the Third Estate became an essential part of revolutionary images produced during the remainder of 1789.

Sieyès' ideas are evident in illustrations like *The Awakening of the Third Estate* (see Source 6.12). The caption, written in the vigorous but slightly incorrect style of everyday speech, states: 'My goodness, it was about time that I woke up, for the oppression of my chains was giving me a terrible nightmare.' The background, showing the decapitation of de Launay, governor of the Bastille, and the demolition of the Bastille, proves that this image was drawn after July 1789.



▲ **Source 6.12** *The Awakening of the Third Estate*, c. July 1789 (anonymous). This image represents the Third Estate 'waking up' to its own importance and throwing off its 'chains' and the domination of the two privileged estates.

- 1 What did the artist mean by suggesting that the Third Estate had been 'asleep'?
- 2 If the Third Estate was now 'waking up' (that is, becoming properly aware of something), what had it finally understood about its own importance and strength?
- 3 How does the detail of the breaking of the chains create a reference to Sieyès' pamphlet?
- 4 How does this image provide a new version of earlier images showing the two privileged estates riding or standing on the Third Estate?

## 6.6 The Tennis Court Oath

When the Estates-General met on 5 May 1789, the meeting still reflected the hierarchies of the old regime. Necker strongly advised the king not to emphasise differences between the estates, but Louis XVI foolishly ignored this. The deputies' different costumes certainly emphasised their differences; the nobles and the clergy looked splendid, while the members of the Third Estate wore plain black. Further, the members of the privileged orders were allowed to enter through the main doorway, while the members of the Third Estate entered through a side door, like servants. Although the writers of the Books of Grievances had demanded that they be treated without humiliating distinctions, the king chose to reinforce these honorific differences.

The voting system was still undecided. Necker conceded that the representation of the Third Estate be doubled, but this concession would be useless if the estates continued to meet and vote separately; the Third Estate would still only be one against two. The king and royal council still insisted that the estates meet separately and ordered them to write their own agendas.

The Third Estate insisted upon meeting in common. On 10 June, it invited the other estates to join it in common assembly, indicating that if they did not, the Third Estate would create a national assembly. It elected

Bailly, the Mayor of Paris, as president, to signal that it would create the new body. Members of the clergy joined the Third Estate from 13–16 June. The Third Estate then voted by a vast majority (491 to 89) to call itself the **National Assembly** on 17 June.

In formally declaring themselves a parliament, the deputies of the Third Estate and their supporters had brought the 'constitutional revolution' to fruition and had thus precipitated the beginning of the French Revolution; the Third Estate had accomplished

the radical transition from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy. The National Assembly stated that, if it were dismissed, all existing taxes would be illegal. It also decreed that once the constitution had been formed, the nation would take on the national debt, thus removing finance from the king.

**National Assembly** a legislative body formed with the task of writing the constitution and forming laws



▲ **Source 6.13** A depiction of Third Estate representatives being locked out of the assembly room, as visualised by a nineteenth-century artist



KEY  
EVENT

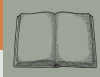
On 20 June, the deputies of the new assembly were locked out of their chamber. This seemed to be a plot. They marched out of the Palace of Versailles to the one public building big enough to hold them all, a commercial tennis court. It was there that the deputies swore the Tennis Court Oath. Led by Bailly, who stood on a makeshift platform, they swore to remain until the nation was given a constitution. Meanwhile, the First Estate had met and the clergy decided, by a narrow majority, to join the new assembly. A few days later, two archbishops led some 150 clergy into the National Assembly.

Although Sieyès suggested a national assembly in January, and although the deputies at Versailles had already formalised this plan some days before, this momentous act of defiance was the start of a constitutional revolution. It stung the king into action. Necker encouraged the king to compromise; he advised Louis XVI to call a royal sitting of the estates and tell them that they would meet in common to discuss all things relating to the nation as a whole, and meet separately to discuss the things that affected them as an estate only. But, it was too late and the king, pushed by different groups of competing advisers at court, took the worst course possible. He ordered the estates to attend a royal session and then had the meeting hall surrounded by armed troops. It seemed like another form of the old *lit de justice*. The king declared the National Assembly's decrees void and commanded that the Estates-General continue to meet, debating partly in common and partly by estate. He said that there would be some reforms, but that the social structure of the regime would remain.

*lit de justice* a formal process by which the king ordered the *parlement* to convene so he could use royal authority to command the *parlement* to register a decree

When news got out, together with rumours that the king intended to dismiss Necker, crowds of people walked to Versailles and surrounded the meeting hall. The deputies refused to leave the hall, confident now of their numbers; they now had 830 members inside and a large and protective crowd outside.

### ANALYSIS ACTIVITY 6.3: READING A PRIMARY SOURCE



#### The new democracy: Who was excluded?

Sieyès wrote the following in *What is the Third Estate?*

*There cannot be, in any form, a freedom or a right without limits. In every country, the law has defined certain characteristics, without which [a person] cannot be a voter or be eligible [that is, to hold political office]. Thus, for example, the law must define an age below which one is unable to represent one's fellow citizens. Thus women everywhere are, for better or for worse, excluded from this sort of activity. It is absolute that a tramp, a beggar, cannot be given the people's political confidence. Would a servant and anybody under the control of a master, a foreigner without naturalisation be allowed to join the representatives of the nation? Political liberties therefore have limits, just like civic liberties.*

**Source 6.14** An extract from Abbé Sieyès' *What is the Third Estate?*, January 1789

- 1 Sieyès easily accepts that there will be some people who will not be given a vote in the new democracy. Is this principle still accepted in modern democracies?
- 2 According to Sieyès, which five categories of people cannot be given the vote?
- 3 What reasons or justifications does he give for these exclusions?

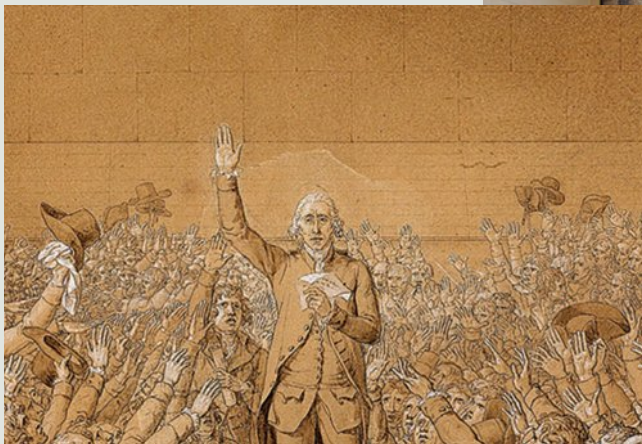


ANALYSIS ACTIVITY 6.4: READING A PRIMARY SOURCE



The new democracy: Who was included?

Look at the arrangement and content of the sources shown here, then answer the questions that follow.



▲ Source 6.15 Top: A modern photograph of the tennis court at Versailles as it appears today. Middle: A representation of the Tennis Court Oath painted by Jacques-Louis David a year later. Bottom: Text and signatures of the Tennis Court Oath.

- 1 What is the event being shown in the centre image and what was its significance?
- 2 Although this scene seems chaotic, the sources have been arranged very carefully to suggest that all these deputies were strongly unified by the same goal. How has this unity been shown?
- 3 What sorts of people were represented in this first National Assembly?
- 4 Which social groups are not represented in this gathering of representatives?

(For an interactive guide to David's depiction of the Tennis Court Oath, please see Cambridge GO.)

## 6.7

## SIGNIFICANT INDIVIDUAL



## Jean-Sylvain Bailly (1736–1793)

Bailly trained as a scientist, specialising in astronomy. He was not a political activist before the revolution, and his political beliefs were moderate; he refused to contribute articles to *The Encyclopaedia* because he realised that its intention was political.

Bailly respected the monarchy, but also believed that society must be based on merit rather than birth, aligning him with the patriots in 1788–89.

Elected to represent the Feuillants district in Paris, Bailly participated in the writing of the Books of Grievances and attended the Estates-General. He was a conscientious and unassuming man, who led the National Assembly in taking the Tennis Court Oath. Later, he was elected President of the National Assembly and Mayor of Paris.

Like Lafayette, Bailly enjoyed his great successes during the first revolution, but by 1791 he was being pressured by the radicalisation of the revolution; his involvement in the repression of the Champ de Mars demonstration immediately affected his popularity and would later lead to his death at the guillotine.



▲ **Source 6.16** Jean-Sylvain Bailly. This portrait provides a dignified representation of a man known for his moderation and restraint.

## 6.8 Paris in a ferment: The tense days of July 1789

By July 1789, Paris was in a ferment and any spark could have ignited the situation.

The king had prepared for military intervention, ordering four regiments to Paris on 26 June, then four more on 1 July, bringing the troops in Paris to an intimidating 20 000. Most were foreign mercenaries, who would be reliable in the case of civil disturbance. Mirabeau demanded that the troops be withdrawn, but the king refused, saying on 8 July that they were necessary to ‘keep order’.

Another important element in this volatile situation was the radical bourgeoisie, who challenged royal authority. They understood that the popular agitation helped their cause, but feared that it could grow into crowd violence against people of property. They were treading a fine line between the political revolution they wanted and an all-out social revolution of the sort they had seen so frighteningly in the recent Réveillon riots.



◀ **Source 6.17** This painting by Lesueur depicts Desmoulins speaking to the people at the gardens of the Palais-Royal.



The Parisian crowd was spoiling for a fight. When it heard that 10 soldiers who had refused to fire on a crowd were going to a provincial prison, a crowd of 4000 broke into the prison and freed them. The people were learning how powerful they were, as well as how incapable the authorities were of stopping them.

Louis XVI dismissed Necker and replaced him with the authoritarian Breteuil on 11 July. The news of Necker's dismissal hit Paris on 12 July, which was a Sunday when nobody was at work. There were large gatherings at the public gardens of the Palais-Royal, where a young journalist, Camille Desmoulins, encouraged the people to arm themselves. Here was a direct link between the radical bourgeoisie and the people of Paris – this articulate and educated, young bourgeois directly instructed working people to rebel.

Workers did not necessarily need the direction of educated bourgeois radicals to know what to do. A year had passed since the storms had destroyed crops across France and bread prices had reached their highest level ever. It was at this point of supreme crisis – a matter of life and death for working people – that they supported Necker, who favoured the control of grain production, as well as government subsidies for bread in times of crisis. When workers learned that Necker had been dismissed, they angrily armed themselves. By evening, armed crowds were roaming the streets, setting fire to the customs houses and tearing down the tax wall.

## 6.9

## SIGNIFICANT INDIVIDUAL

**Camille Desmoulins (1760–1794)**

Camille Desmoulins was a childhood friend of Maximilien de Robespierre (see Chapter 15). He was inspired by the *philosophes* such as Voltaire to hate organised religion and to criticise the monarchy. His study of the classics inspired his republicanism. He became a lawyer, but his stutter caused his practice to fail.

In the crisis of 1787–89, Desmoulins saw an opportunity to exercise his talents more effectively. He wrote pamphlets and attempted, unsuccessfully, to be a delegate to the Estates-General. He achieved fame when, on 12 July 1789, he urged the Parisian crowd to arm themselves, leading to the capture of the Bastille. He then wrote pamphlets such as *Free France* (1789), which suggested that a republic would allow popular political participation, and *Discourse from the Lantern to Parisians* (1789), in which he explained the role of revolutionary violence.

Desmoulins initially supported Mirabeau, but then found Danton and the radical Cordeliers Club more sympathetic to his democratic beliefs. His newspaper, *The Revolutions of France and Brabant* (1789–91), continuously made the case for greater political democracy. He was the voice of democratic republicanism.

In 1791, Desmoulins campaigned with the Cordeliers for the abdication of the king. He was blamed for the Champ de Mars massacre (see Chapter 11) and went into hiding. When Desmoulins re-entered politics, he played a key role in organising the second revolution of 10 August 1792. In 1793, he used a new journal, *The Old Cordelier*, to attack the radical Hébertists and to propose an end to Terror. In 1794, he was associated with Danton's 'Indulgent Party', criticising the Terror and demanding a tribunal of clemency. Despite Robespierre's friendship, he was guillotined on 13 April 1794.



▲ Source 6.18 Camille Desmoulins as painted by François Dumont



▲ Source 6.19 This painting shows Camille and Lucile Desmoulins with their son Horace in about 1792.

## The formation of the National Guard

While Danton and Desmoulins, along with other radical journalists, were stirring up the people, other bourgeois leaders were becoming alarmed. The Committee of Electors, which had first met to elect the deputies of the Third Estate at Versailles, still met in the Paris Town Hall. This provisional government aimed to prevent the revolutionary situation from getting out of hand. It feared conspiracy by privileged Versailles nobles. It also distrusted the thousands of poor, unemployed people streaming into Paris from the countryside and equipping themselves with weapons stolen from the royal armouries. In response, these 'electors' formed the **National Guard**, made up of reliable bourgeois citizens to protect private property if this so-called rabble got out of hand.

This tension between propertied bourgeois and the revolutionary crowd is the most basic division within the French Revolution. On the one hand, bourgeois radicals were stirring up 'the people' and giving them weapons, but at the same time responsible citizens were creating a **militia** of property owners in order to protect private property. Historians correctly call this latter situation a 'bourgeois' revolution, because it never intended to allow a massive **democratisation** of politics or a socialistic attack on property.

By 13 July, the crowd understood that it needed to prepare for battle and search for food and weapons. The people moved methodically through Paris. At the Abbey of Saint-Lazare, they found enormous stocks of grain and concluded that the grain crisis had been created artificially by the rich hoarding food.

► **Source 6.20** This painting by Jean-Francois Bellier shows the citizen de Naudeville proudly dressed in his new uniform of the National Guard.



**National Guard** a force made up of reliable bourgeois citizens to protect private property

**militia** a fighting force made up of non-professional soldiers

**democratisation** the process of opening up politics to ordinary people who had previously not been able to participate in the political life of the nation



◀ **Source 6.21** The sacking of the Abbey of Saint-Lazare



## The regime loses its command of military force

If it is true that a ruler's authority is based on their command of armed force, then the warning signs became clear in a strange incident just before the capture of the Bastille. According to historian Peter Vansittart, one aristocrat said grimly:

*The defection of the Army was not one of the causes of the Revolution, it was the revolution itself.*

On 14 July, some 30 000 people attacked Les Invalides, a military hospital. The commander of the regiment, camping nearby, doubted whether his troops would obey the order to fire on the crowd. The crowd looted the hospital and seized a battery of 12 cannon and 40 000 muskets, and dragged them to the town hall.

Were the soldiers sympathetic to the Third Estate? Historian Timothy Blanning argues that the crisis in the army was caused by unpopular reforms. Many liberal nobles who participated in the revolution – Lafayette, Lauzun and the Lameth brothers – began their activism as critics of royal military policies. In 1787, they sabotaged reforms and by 1788–89 were themselves unwilling to order their troops to defend the king.

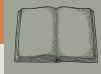
### FOCUS QUESTIONS 6.3

- 1 How do we know that the bourgeois leaders of the revolution both needed the violent action of the crowd and also feared it?
- 2 Why did the episode at Les Invalides hospital suggest that the old regime might be in serious trouble by 1789?



▲ **Source 6.22** This painting is a representation of the Parisian crowd's first attack on 14 July, when it raided the military hospital of Les Invalides.

ANALYSIS ACTIVITY 6.5: READING A PRIMARY SOURCE



Warning signs from the army

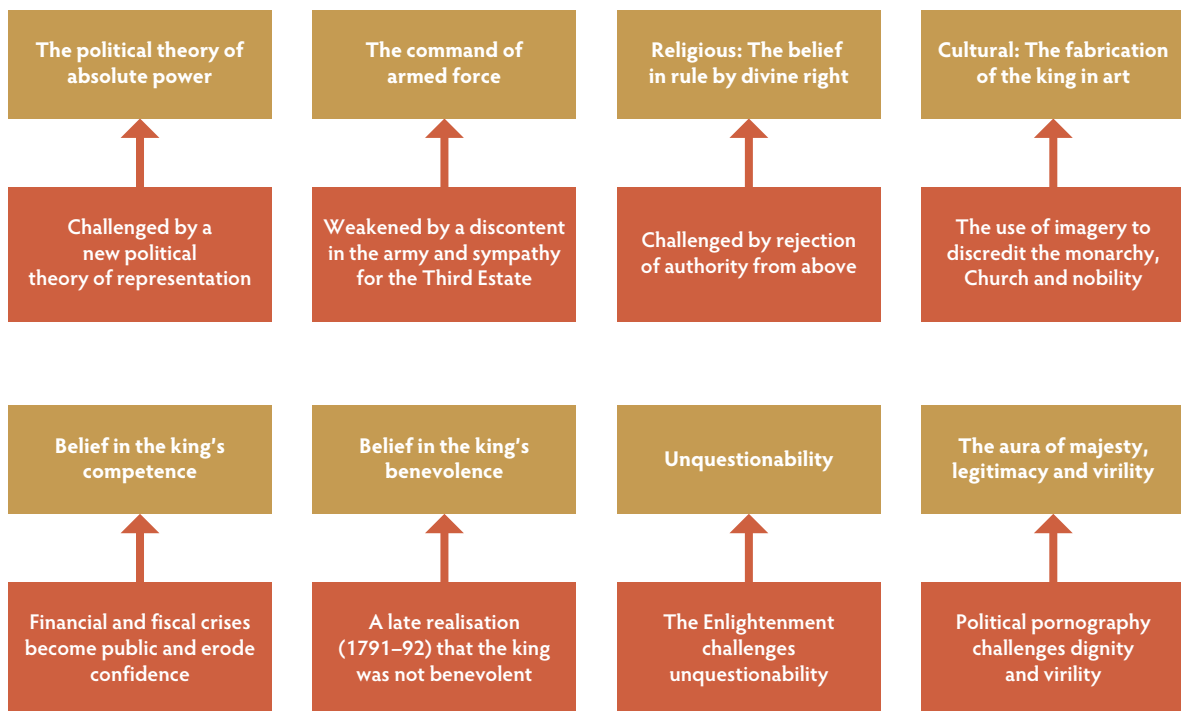
A report on the state of the King XVI's army in France:

*The tumult caused by the royal sittings [of the Estates-General] has produced a very great agitation among the people. The French Guards at Paris, amounting to 4000 men, have refused to obey the king's orders, and declared themselves to be 'soldiers of the nation'. The Duc de Chatelet, their colonel, went to Versailles and assured the king that he could not answer for his safety, if he continued to enforce the royal orders.*

Source 6.23 Adapted from Peter Vansittart, *Voices of the French Revolution*, 1989, p. 95

- 1 According to this reporter, what events had done the most to stir up popular anger in Paris?
- 2 What did the troops mean when they took on the name of 'soldiers of the nation'? To whom were they giving their loyalty?
- 3 Why would the training and expertise of these French guards prove to be crucial to the revolutionaries once fighting broke out?
- 4 How might these first incidents of disloyalty in the army have affected the king's decision about whether to try to use military force to restore his authority?

THE STRANDS OF POWER: REVIEWING THE CRISIS OF ROYAL POWER TO 1789



THE STORY SO FAR



By this point, the French monarchy had suffered not one but a series of crises, which had interacted to create its downfall. Recalling that royal authority was made up of several strands of power, we can see that each one of these elements had been weakened by some aspect of this crisis.

Use the QR code or visit the Interactive Textbook and watch the video summarising the chapter.





## Develop your historical-thinking skills

### Establishing historical significance

Copy this table into your workbook and list the significance of these important revolutionary events.

| Date         | Event  | What happened?  | What was the significance?              |
|--------------|--|---|---|
| January 1789 | Abbé Sieyès publishes <i>What is the Third Estate?</i> | This makes a powerful argument that the deputies of the Third Estate were already representatives of the nation | <i>This was significant because ...</i> |
| 20 June 1789 | The Tennis Court Oath                                  | The deputies establish the National Assembly  | <i>This was significant because ...</i> |
| 11 July 1789 | Dismissal of Necker                                    | Louis XVI sacks the popular finance minister  | <i>This was significant because ...</i> |
| 14 July 1789 | The attack on Les Invalides                            | The Parisian crowd seizes cannon and muskets from the armoury   | <i>This was significant because ...</i> |

### Analysing cause and consequence

- 1 What was the content of the Tennis Court Oath and what was its significance to the development of the revolution?
- 2 What was meant by ‘constitution’ and ‘national assembly’?
- 3 For what reason could a single estate claim to represent the whole nation?
- 4 Why should the events of May and June 1789 be known as a ‘bourgeois’ revolution? How did the Third Estate redefine itself during this time?

### Using historical terms meaningfully

Write an extended paragraph explaining why the meeting and the regulation of the Estates-General eventually resulted in the constitutional revolution of 20 June 1789 and the popular revolution of 14 July 1789. Use the following phrases and terms to show you understand their meaning and context:

- *What is the Third Estate?*
- voting by order
- voting by head
- the doubling of the Third Estate
- actions from deputies of the Third Estate
- support from liberal clergy
- the Tennis Court Oath.



## Using quotes as evidence

Write a sentence using a short phrase from one of the quotes below or contrast the views from a few of the quotes. You can also use any of the quotes in the chapter. Any quotes you choose can be used directly or paraphrased into your own words.

*The legal, peaceful revolution of the bourgeoisie, achieved by lawyers who borrowed their methods from the parlement of Paris, was to all appearances victorious.*

**Georges Lefebvre, historian**

*This assembly had seized sovereign power in the name of the French Nation. It was the founding act of the French Revolution. If the Nation was sovereign, the king no longer was.*

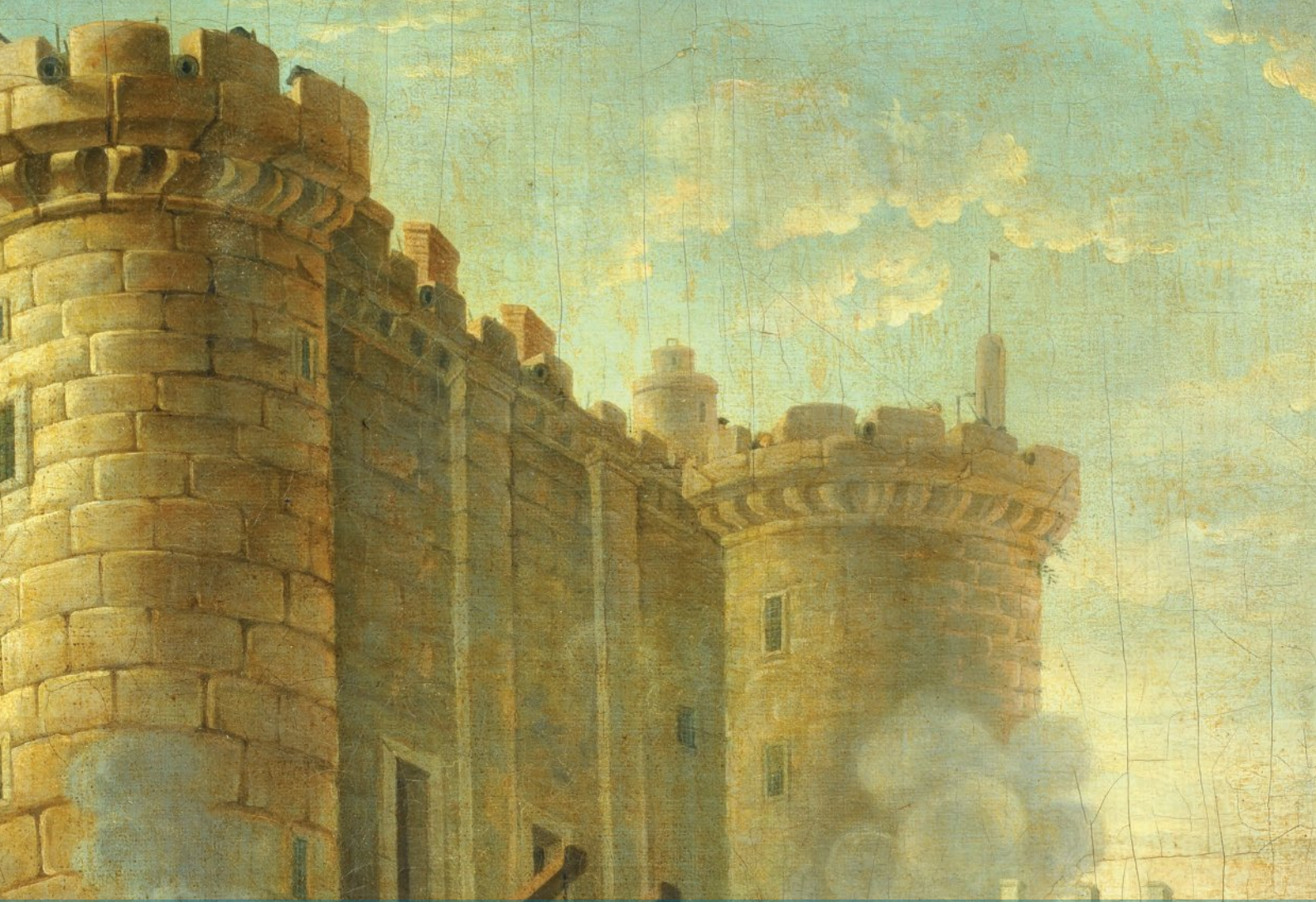
**William Doyle, historian**

*The infant National Assembly was secure, but at the price of protection from the people rather than the monarchy.*

**Nigel Aston, historian**

*If 14 July had dealt a death blow to the political authority of Bourbon France, the night of 4 August destroyed its social and administrative base.*

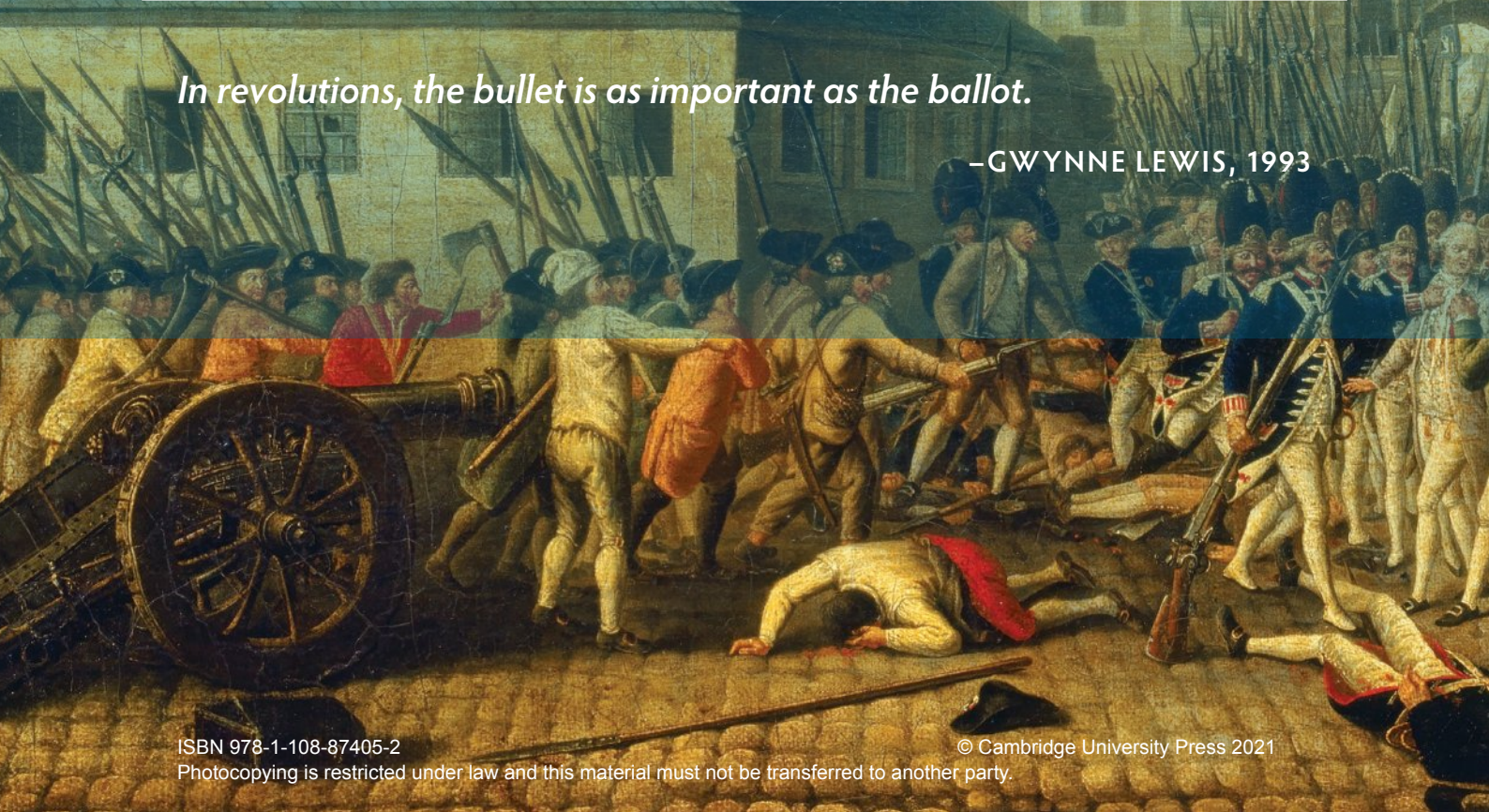
**Gwynne Lewis, historian**



# 7 THE OUTBREAK OF POPULAR REVOLUTION, 1789

*In revolutions, the bullet is as important as the ballot.*

—GWYNNE LEWIS, 1993



## Overview

The creation of a national assembly demonstrated that the deputies could create a parliament, while the storming of the Bastille showed that the Parisian crowd could defend that assembly against royal retaliation. This did not mean that the revolution was necessarily safe. Patriots doubted that the king would remain loyal to the revolution.

The year of 1789 also showed that a revolution reflects the aims and ideals of the people guiding it. Most deputies were urban middle class, having little idea of peasant grievances. In July and August 1789, peasants across France expressed their grievances in the rural rebellion of the **Great Fear**. This serious rebellion forced the National Assembly to abolish some of the feudal system in theory; later, in the **August Decrees**, this declaration was modified to ensure that peasants could buy their way out of their feudal payments.

**Great Fear** a serious rural rebellion that forced the National Assembly to abolish some of the feudal system



**August Decrees** a document that abolished aspects of the feudal system and later ensured that peasants could buy their way out of feudal payments

## Key issues

- What effect did the capture of the Bastille have on the development of the revolution?
- How was the revolution consolidated in 1789?
- What was Lafayette's relationship with the popular movement?
- What caused the peasant revolt in July and August 1789?
- What was the significance of the Night of Patriotic Delirium?

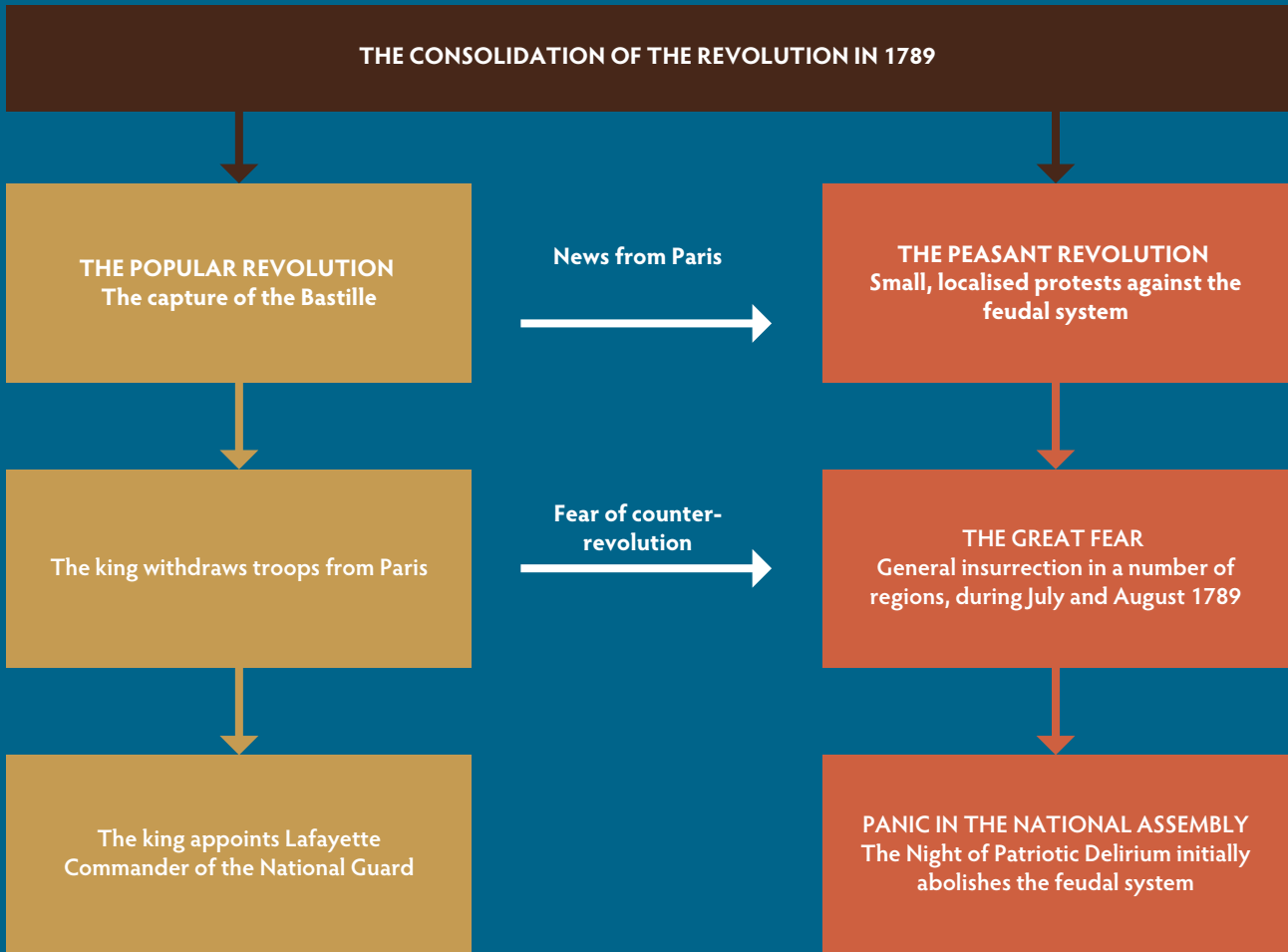
## Digital resources for this chapter

In the *Interactive Textbook*:

-  Video and audio sources and questions
-  Digital activities.

◀ **Source 7.0** This oil painting is a representation of the moment when the crowd captured the Bastille and arrested its commander, Marquis de Launay.

# Flow of chapter



# Chapter timeline

**JULY 14 1789**

*The Parisian crowd attacks Les Invalides to seize guns and rifles, then the Bastille to seize gunpowder and shot*



**JULY TO AUGUST 1789**

*The peasant revolt and Great Fear takes place in the countryside*



**22 JULY 1789**

*The murder of de Savigny and Foulon*



**4-5 AUGUST 1789**

*The Night of Patriotic Delirium abolishes some, but not all, of the feudal system*



## 7.1 The storming of the Bastille

After the attack on Les Invalides, the next target was the royal prison of the Bastille, rumoured to hold a supply of 250 barrels of gunpowder and shot. A large crowd gathered in front of the prison on 14 July 1789. It was an emotive symbol because it was a royal fortress, as unshakeable as royal authority itself, and because it was an instrument of repression, with cannon positioned to fire upon the working-class suburb of Saint-Antoine.

▼ **Source 7.1** This painting of the taking of the Bastille is by Claude Cholat. Cholat was a wine merchant present during the event.



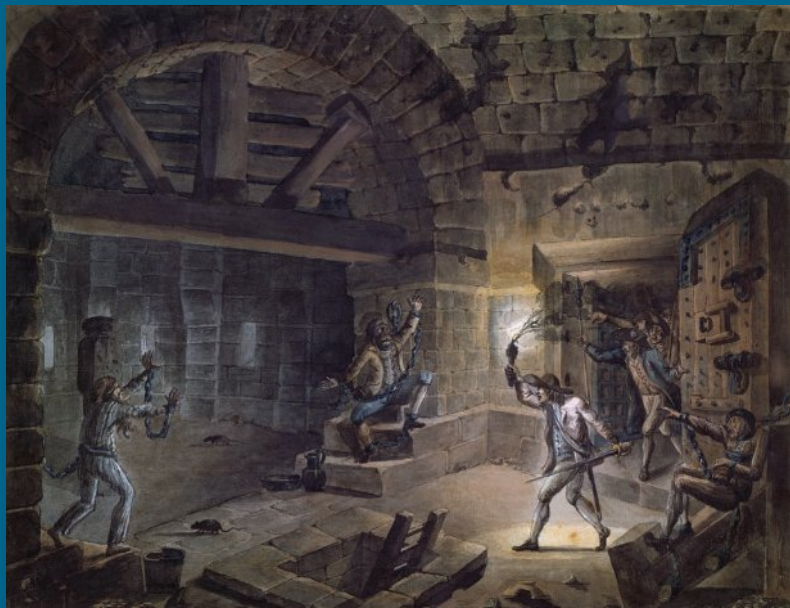


**KEY EVENT**

The crowd attempted first to negotiate the surrender of gunpowder and the withdrawal of the cannon from the towers. When that failed, participants broke into the inner courtyard. While negotiations continued, the prison's guards fired, killing 98 people. About 60 French Guards, commanded by a Sergeant Hulin, defecting from the royal regiment, reinforced the crowd. They showed the crowd how to move, load and position four cannon to destroy the prison doors. Knowing that defeat was inevitable, the governor of the Bastille, de Launay, surrendered.

**AMAZING BUT TRUE ...**

The 'victors of the Bastille' hoped to free hundreds of victims of royal despotism from the dungeons of the Bastille. In reality, they found only seven prisoners, one of whom was quite mad (he believed he was God). Another was a suspected assassin and four were forgers. The royal government had, just before the revolution, discussed the idea of demolishing the almost useless prison and replacing it with a public square!



► Source 7.2 The freeing of prisoners from the Bastille



◀ Source 7.3 This cartoon from the early nineteenth-century depicts the crowd's violence outside the Bastille on 14 July 1789.

## ANALYSIS ACTIVITY 7.1: READING A PRIMARY SOURCE



### The psychological impact of a revolution

Studies of revolutions often concentrate on the great political and social changes that occur. It is easy to forget the more personal experience of revolution – the psychological aspect of the experience. Revolutions usually create a strong feeling of liberation, often expressed in a holiday-like atmosphere. An English observer, Edward Rigby, noted this outpouring of joy in a private letter to his family, describing the events he had witnessed in Paris:

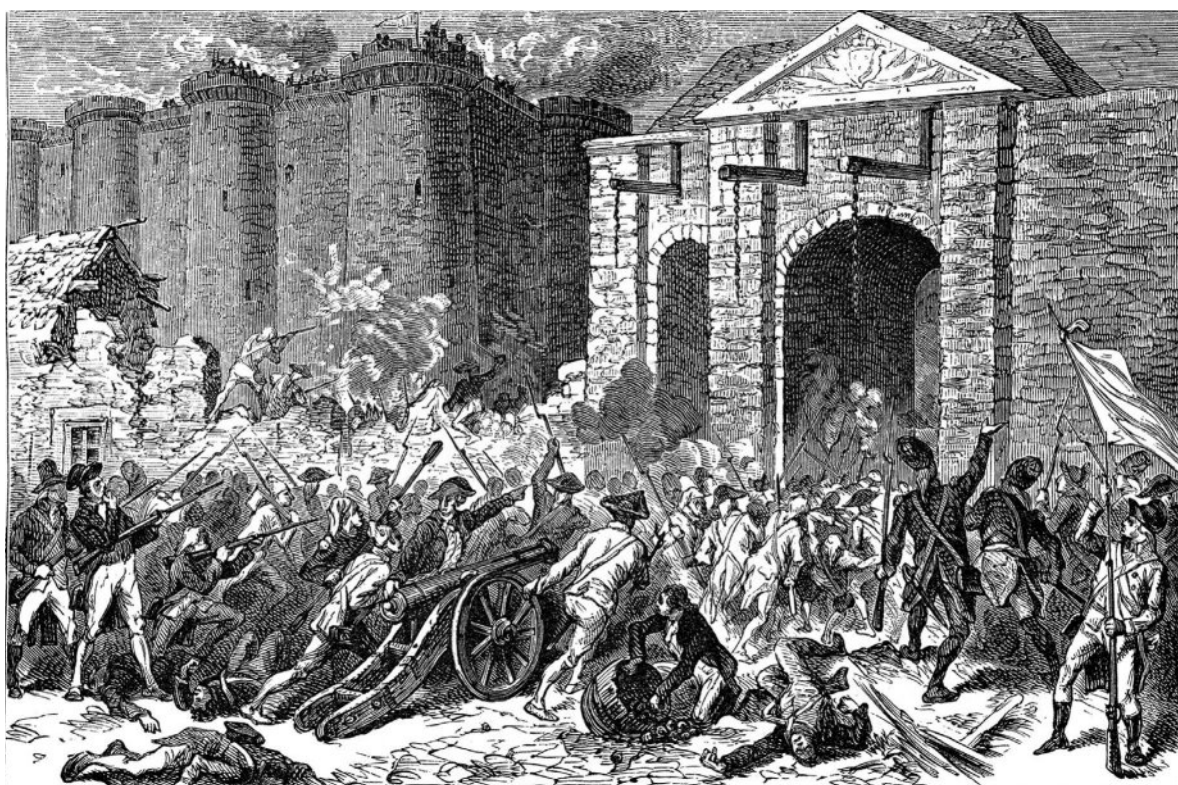
*1789: The Fall of the Bastille, 14 July 1789*

*[We] saw a flag, some large keys, and a paper elevated on a pole above the crowd, on which was inscribed 'The Bastille has been captured and the doors are open.' The intelligence of this extraordinary event, thus communicated, produced an impression on the crowd really indescribable. A sudden burst of the most frantic joy instantaneously took place; every possible mode, in which the most rapturous feelings of joy could be expressed, were everywhere exhibited. Shouts and shrieks, leaping and embracing, laughter and tears, every sound and every gesture, including what even approached nervous affection, manifested ... such an instantaneous and unanimous emotion of extreme gladness as I should suppose was never before experienced by human beings.*

**Source 7.4** Quoted in Leonard Cowie, *The French Revolution*, 1988, p. 5

- 1 What might have been the origin of the 'flag' and the 'large keys' being carried triumphantly through the streets?
- 2 Although Rigby notes the outpouring of joy among ordinary people, he does not explain its actual reason. What might the capture of the Bastille have meant to the working people of the suburb?
- 3 In this surge of public emotion, what surprises Rigby most of all?

▼ **Source 7.5** The Bastille was a medieval fortress, armory, and political prison in the centre of Paris and represented royal authority.



## 7.2 How was the revolution consolidated during 1789?

The significance of the capture of the Bastille was both symbolic and strategic: the crowd had never before captured a royal military fortress. The popular movement was crucial to the success of the revolution because it forced the king to remove the troops surrounding Paris on 16 July and to admit that he had lost the most basic form of authority; that is, the command of armed force. The deputies acclaimed his goodness and wisdom as the father of the people. The king's brother, the Comte d'Artois, fled France, indicating that the revolution had succeeded. Louis XVI announced the recall of Necker, confirmed the withdrawal of troops, agreed to the nomination of Bailly as the Mayor of Paris and confirmed Lafayette as the head of the National Guard on 17 July 1789.

There were now 15 000 armed and triumphant revolutionaries in Paris. The Parisian crowd felt its collective power and savoured the new experience of being able to punish the powerful. The popular movement was crucial to this success; it was powerful and could not be controlled or repressed. However, responsible middle-class people feared uncontrolled violence and viewed the crowd with suspicion.

### The murder of de Launay

The storming of the Bastille was one of the revolution's first great crowd actions. During 12–13 July, revolutionary leaders held meetings and demonstrations, urging revolutionary action; they were directing the popular movement. However, the actual attack on the Bastille occurred spontaneously, with working people in several suburbs deciding independently to act.

▼ **Source 7.6** The Parisian crowd could and did take its own independent action. In this representation, we see the crowd taking severed heads of the commander of the Bastille, de Launay, and Judge de Flesselles to the Paris Town Hall.





One of the most important, and shocking, flashpoints of the French Revolution occurred after Commander de Launay and his officers had surrendered. For the bourgeois leaders of Paris (a committee known as the 'Electors of Paris') who were running the government, it was crucial that he have a legal trial. But, the crowd wanted revenge and argued fiercely with the members of the committee. In a sense, here were two French revolutions face to face – one middle class, legalistic and restrained, and the other popular and prone to use violence as a means of political expression. A young journalist recorded, in the first issue of *The Revolutions of Paris* (17 July 1789), what happened next:

*On arriving, these people who were so impatient to avenge themselves allowed neither de Launay [sic] nor the other officers to go into the city court; they tore them from the hands of their conquerors and trampled them underfoot one after the other; de Launay [sic] was pierced by countless blows, his head was cut off and carried on the end of a spear, and his blood ran everywhere.*

**Source 7.7** Quoted in Philip Dwyer and Peter McPhee (eds), *The French Revolution and Napoleon*, 2002, p. 19

The crowd also killed three staff officers and three veteran soldiers in their fury. Later, the crowd killed a judge, Jacques de Flesselles, because he tried to stop the handing out of weapons. However, it is important to remember that the crowd itself had been fired upon, with a loss of 98 lives. Moreover, the crowd also voted more calmly on the fate of the soldiers who had defended the Bastille and decided unanimously to spare their lives. Their actions clearly showed that the popular movement could take more extreme and violent action than its middle-class leaders wanted. When the crowd turned violent, few would dare to stand in its way.

### FOCUS QUESTIONS 7.1

- 1 What does the murder of de Launay suggest about the revolutionary crowd and its relationship with revolutionary leaders?

## Lafayette and the National Guard

The most important aspect of political leaders is the way in which they offer some special leadership skill that is vitally needed at a given point. Lafayette was a genuinely popular hero of the American Revolution and believed that he could use this to guide – although not control – the powerful popular movement. This role is evident in his creation of the National Guard, intended both to defend the revolution against the noble counter-revolution and to defend citizens' private property against the crowd.

After the death of de Launay, the National Guard became a restricted institution. Citizens had to satisfy a property qualification to gain admission, and had to be able to afford an expensive weapon and uniform. Lafayette was appointed Commander of the National Guard on 15 July 1789 by acclamation of the crowd assembled at the Hotel de Ville. A stickler for legality, he insisted that the crowd's choice be confirmed officially by the electors of the districts of Paris. He felt himself

► **Source 7.8** This engraving depicts Lafayette as commander of the National Guard.





truly confirmed when the king approved his appointment. This moment of transformation from the hero of America to the master of Paris reveals how uneasily he was juggling the three forces: the power of the crowd, the representative authority of the electors and the royal authority of the king.

### FOCUS QUESTIONS 7.2

- 1 Why did the aristocratic Marquis de Lafayette enjoy the confidence of the revolutionary crowd?
- 2 What did Lafayette have to offer the bourgeois citizens who were concerned about the maintenance of law and order?

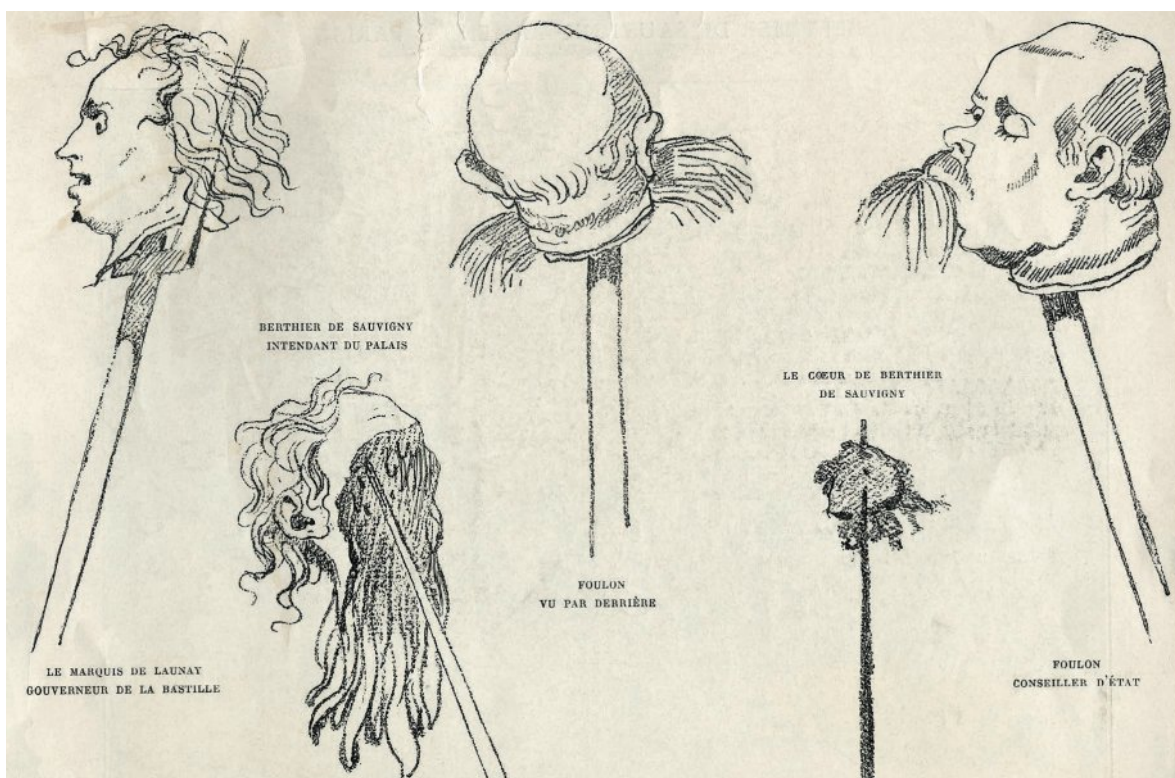
### What was Lafayette's relationship with the popular movement?

Lafayette offered a special combination of leadership qualities that exactly met the needs of the moment. As a man of action, he had demonstrated his commitment to liberty. As a thinker, he had established strong links with the 'patriot' cause. But, there were two more features that were important. As a military man, he could actually organise an effective militia, yet as a popular hero he would not appear to be an oppressor.

### Lafayette feels the limits of his power

Lafayette's power was limited, and he often galloped around Paris stopping violent incidents, such as the brutal murders of royal officials on 22 July. The crowd caught Bertier de Sauvigny, the Intendant of Paris, who they blamed for food shortages, and his father-in-law, Foulon, a minister after Necker's dismissal. The crowd accused them, without evidence, of plotting to starve the working people of the city. They were taken to the town hall for punishment.

Lafayette temporarily calmed the crowd, but when he tried to order the removal of Foulon, the crowd erupted. Lafayette then felt the limits of his hero status. He stood there, shouting himself hoarse trying to restrain the crowd. When Foulon foolishly applauded Lafayette's plea for a legal trial, the crowd



▲ **Source 7.9** This drawing by the artist Girardet shows the head of de Launay on a pike (*left*), the head of Bertier de Sauvigny with the face slashed (*second left*) and two views of the head of Foulon, with the mouth stuffed with dung and hay.

overpowered the guards and executed both prisoners. Their heads were cut off, Berthier's face was slashed to ribbons with a bayonet and Foulon's mouth was filled with hay and dung.

Thus there were two different sorts of revolutions happening in Paris in 1789 – a legalistic middle-class revolution and a more violent popular movement – and Lafayette's role as a leader was to try to juggle them successfully.

### ANALYSIS ACTIVITY 7.2: READING A PRIMARY SOURCE



#### Lafayette writing a letter to his mistress in 1789

This private letter by Lafayette is very revealing, because it shows that he was proud of his reputation with, and influence over, the Parisian revolutionary crowd. The document starts with Lafayette boasting about his role, but he then suddenly becomes more realistic and admits that he does not have complete control over them, as he learned in the murders of 22 July 1789. This document perfectly sums up the dilemma of most leaders during the French Revolution.

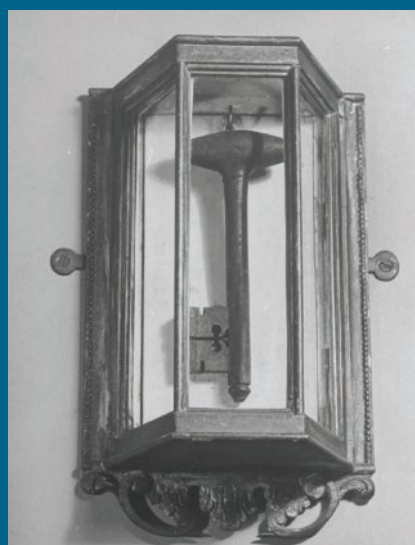
*The people can only be controlled by me. Forty thousand people gather, the excitement reaches fever pitch, I appear, and one word from me disperses them. I have already saved the lives of six persons who were about to be hanged in various parts of the city, but these furious, intoxicated people will not always listen to me. I rule in Paris over an enraged people manipulated by appalling plotters; on the other hand they have suffered a thousand injustices of which they have good reason to complain.*

**Source 7.10** Peter Buckman, *Lafayette: A Biography*, 1977, p. 148.

- 1 Using this document only, explain how Lafayette describes his control over the crowd. Does he claim that he has complete control over the Parisian people?
- 2 Using this document and your own knowledge, explain why Lafayette's statement is a quite accurate description of the role of a revolutionary leader.

### AMAZING BUT TRUE ...

After the storming of the Bastille, Lafayette sent George Washington one of the keys to the Bastille prison. Washington described it as 'the token of victory gained by liberty over despotism by another', and it still rests in his home in Mount Vernon.



► **Source 7.11** Lafayette's gift to George Washington



## 7.3 The peasant revolt or Great Fear

### revolt of the nobles

Assembly of Notables

### revolt of the bourgeoisie

Tennis Court Oath

### revolt of the popular

**movement** capture of the Bastille

### municipal revolution

after the Parisian revolution in July 1789, revolutionaries in the provincial cities overthrew royal officials and created elected governments

**jacquerie** the peasants' long tradition of riot

According to historian Georges Lefebvre, the revolution had by now developed through a number of stages, from a **revolt of the nobles** (Assembly of Notables) to a **revolt of the bourgeoisie** (Tennis Court Oath) then to a **revolt of the popular movement** (capture of the Bastille). The fourth stage was the peasant revolution in the countryside, which occurred from July to August in 1789.

News of the Parisian revolution spread to the provincial cities, where revolutionaries also took over government (the **municipal revolution**), and to the countryside. The peasant rebellion sprang from the long-term anger about the weight of feudal dues. The disastrous harvest of 1788 also affected peasant families even more cruelly than it did urban working families.

Late in 1788, peasants began small, local protests about bread prices. In early 1789, they protested against hunting rights, feudal dues, tithes and royal taxes. Peasants had a long tradition of riot (**jacquerie**), which was usually general and indiscriminate, but short lived. Whole villages, led by their local officials, went systematically to each castle and broke into the strongrooms containing feudal contracts, which they burned. The raids were not violent, unless the landowner

resisted; across France, only four landowners were killed. It was clear that some peasants had learnt to think and express themselves politically.

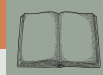


### FOCUS QUESTIONS 7.3

- 1 Name two ways in which the Paris revolution spread out into regional France.
- 2 Why would a revolt of the mass of the peasantry represent a serious attack on the established order?

► **Source 7.12** This engraving depicts a peasant attack on a lord's castle. The peasant bands targeted the strongrooms where feudal documents were kept.

### ANALYSIS ACTIVITY 7.3: READING A PRIMARY SOURCE



#### Peasants act on their grievances

*I learnt that approximately 300 brigands [robbers] from all the lands ... of Mme the Marquise de Longaunay have stolen the titles and rents and allowances of [the estate], and demolished her dovecotes [a cage for doves]: they then gave her a receipt for the theft signed 'The nation'. The same men, four days ago, entered a castle of the Prince of Monaco ... to steal the titles from there also; not finding them, they unleashed their fury on the furniture in the castle and reduced it to dust.*

**Source 7.13** A letter from the steward of the Duke of Monmorency, written 2 August 1789 as quoted in Philip Dwyer and Peter McPhee (eds), *The French Revolution and Napoleon*, 2002, p. 23

- 1 What exactly were the documents the 'brigands' were trying to destroy?
- 2 Why would the peasants destroy something harmless like a dovecote?
- 3 Is there any evidence in this document that these peasants have learned some of the new political language of the revolution?

By July 1789, peasants were hearing Parisian rumours that the Versailles nobles would crush the revolution and punish the rebellious villages. In this panicky world of unsubstantiated gossip, the story spread that noble landowners had hired criminals to burn the peasants' crops to starve and punish them. In reality, the landowners – noble and bourgeois – fearfully watched the peasant revolt. Gradually, rumours spread among village people of suspicious strangers on local roads; fires from distant castles were misinterpreted as crops burning. The new wave of rioting, from 20 July to 6 August, was limited to six regions, leaving whole provinces unaffected. Nonetheless, reports flooded into Paris, giving the impression of a massive **insurrection** threatening the collapse of order and authority, and a possible seizure of all property by peasants.

**insurrection** rebellion against the government

How would the National Assembly react to this attack on property? The bourgeois deputies were themselves large landowners and so defended property rights. However, a small group of radicals did question the feudal system itself.



▲ **Source 7.14** This map shows how rumours, like most other information, travelled by verbal transmission in country areas. Despite the physical difficulties of communication, these rumours spread very quickly.



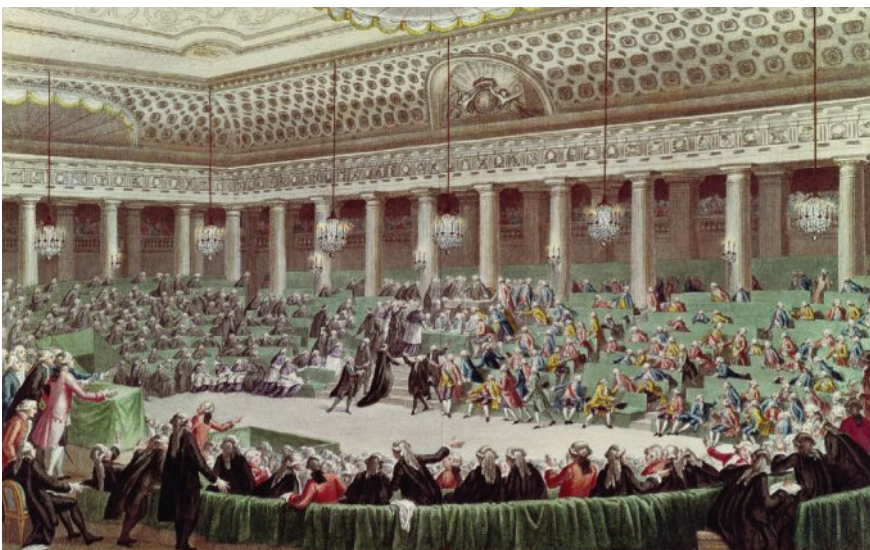
## 7.4 The Night of Patriotic Delirium, 4 August 1789

**Breton Club** a group of deputies from the region of Brittany, who recommended, then demanded, that the National Assembly abolish feudal dues on peasants

The incoming reports terrified the National Assembly. On 4 August 1789, it debated the peasant rebellion. Because communications were slow, reports from distant communities were still arriving when the actual disturbances had ended. The National Assembly had previously debated the abolition of privilege, but the ‘patriots’ lost. Now, about 100 deputies, including the **Breton Club**, appealed to the conscience of the privileged orders. They asked that the National Assembly recognise peasant grievances and remove crushing feudal dues.



KEY  
EVENT



▲ Source 7.15 This engraving is an imagined representation of the events of 4–5 August 1789 in the National Assembly.



◀ Source 7.16 Men destroy the attributes of privilege on the Night of Patriotic Delirium.

The debate that followed, which lasted from 4–5 August, was chaotic and emotional. Some nobles surrendered their own privileges. In the delirious atmosphere, they composed the stirring introduction to the August Decrees, abolishing feudalism completely. The retrospective minutes of that chaotic meeting stated that they had abolished privilege, established equal responsibility for taxation, abolished venal offices and provided for the abolition or the negotiated end of feudal dues.

## 7.5 How did environmental factors contribute to the revolution?

### The role of environment

The study of environmental impacts is important, especially because the current direction of historical research and writing, in this age of global warming, focuses on how the environment affects the ways people behave.

Historian Judy Anderson has suggested that most of the major outbreaks of popular action in the French Revolution are related in some way to shortage in grain and bread supplies, and to rises in the price of bread. Of course, there were also some political issues causing popular action, but food anxiety tended to increase the crowd's militancy.

Historian Peter McPhee agrees with Anderson and suggests that the price of food directly influenced revolutionary action. He invites us to understand the problem in terms of a simple analogy. McPhee likens the relationship between the price of food with revolutionary action to a pot of water on a gas burner: when you turn up the heat, the water in the pot boils over. Using this comparison, we could say that if bread prices provided the 'heat' of the revolution, their increases would provoke a sudden 'boiling over' of popular action.

But, we need to unpack this relationship between food anxiety and revolutionary action. As citizens in Australia during the twenty-first century, most of us are unlikely to be anxious about having food on the table; bread is just something we can buy at the supermarket any time. It is almost impossible for us to imagine how anybody could be anxious about the price of bread! However, we need to understand that working people in eighteenth-century France earned relatively little, and they spent the greatest part of their income buying staple foods such as bread.

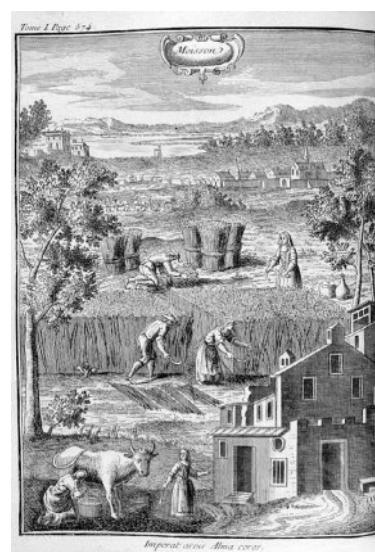
#### FOCUS QUESTION 7.4

- 1 How does Peter McPhee explain the relationship between food prices and the revolutionary action of the crowd?

### The natural environment of France

France's natural environment was, in many ways, very rich in terms of food production. Many areas, such as the Île-de-France region around Paris, contained rich, fertile land that was good for crops and for rearing herds of animals. Other regions, such as Brittany and Normandy, had the added benefit of coastlines, which offered residents access to the rich food resources of the seas. There were strong extremes of weather and temperature between summer and winter, but farming people knew how to work around these conditions.

The cause of trouble in France's food supply was freak environmental events, most notably severe storms, which could flatten acres of crops and cause grain shortages. As Chapter 6 has described, the revolutionary outbreak of 1789 occurred just one year after a massive storm in 1788, which destroyed a large amount of crops just before they were due to be harvested. Another important environmental threat that jeopardised the food supply was drought. In 1789, France



▲ **Source 7.17** *Harvest, 1775*. This engraving depicts farmers in France reaping an abundant harvest.



was affected by severe drought, and rivers and streams dried up. In that year, the grain harvest was very good, but millers could not grind it into flour to make bread because their mills were driven by water and had no power because of the drought.

### FOCUS QUESTION 7.5

- 1 Identify two main weather events that could cause damage to crops and make the price of food rise.

## The human-made environment of France

The vast majority of the population lived by working the land and many people resided in small villages. Because of the subsistence economy, in which millions of small farms produced enough food to eat and less to sell, the supply of food from country to city was always uncertain and shortages were frequent.

The French monarchy had learned, by hard experience, that food shortages pushed the prices of bread, wine and all other foodstuffs upwards in a severe inflationary movement. This, in turn, put extreme pressure on working people, simply because they already spent a large proportion of their income – perhaps between 40 to 60 per cent – on food so they had little financial capacity to pay higher prices.

Indeed, starvation was a very real possibility in times of food shortages and price rises.

This is why inflating prices quickly provoked riots and other popular disturbances. The monarchy therefore appointed officials responsible to keep emergency reserves of grain to calm popular anger before it started.

France's subsistence economy also meant that rural farms and villages tried to produce as much other material (such as clothing, tools and furniture) as they could, without having to buy expensive manufactured goods in towns. Thus, towns that had workshops and small factories could not necessarily rely on the nearby country folk to buy their goods. In times of hardship, rural people cut back even more on purchases, immediately causing decreased production and unemployment in towns, which, in turn, caused further unrest and disturbances. So, town and country were linked, and economic problems quickly affected all working people.

## The importance of bread in the eighteenth-century France

To really understand this problem, we need to go back to the world of eighteenth-century working people. In that world, it was possible for a person, or their family members, to die if bread prices rose too much. Since this was ultimately a matter of survival, news of a bad harvest in a given year immediately generated nation-wide anxiety and the threat of violent popular action by crowds of working people. Therefore, the most fundamental and dangerous grievance in old-regime France was the price of the most basic of staple foods: bread.

Historian William Doyle makes the crucial point that the people who made up these violent crowds were described at the time as the rabble, suggesting this was action by the dregs of society such as beggars, thieves and tramps. However, this is completely incorrect: there might have been a very small



▲ Source 7.18 This nineteenth century engraving depicts bread being rationed out at the Louvre during the 1709 famine.



proportion of petty criminals in these crowds, but most of the people were respectable working folk, some of them highly skilled craftsmen.

Doyle reminds us that it was not criminality that drove them, but survival:

*But in fact most of these disturbances were the work of people with everything to lose. It was that which made them so frenzied. Bread made up three-quarters of an ordinary person's diet and in normal times the poorest wage-earner might spend a third or even a half of his income on it. When it rose in price his whole livelihood was threatened, since it left him with less for other food, clothing, heating and rent, and opened the prospect of destitution.*

Source 7.19 William Doyle, *Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 1989, p. 22

## A long history of food anxiety

Food anxiety in France was sharpened not only because the seasons and harvests varied considerably, but because the government repeatedly changed its policies on controlling the price of food. In general, ordinary people firmly believed that the government had an absolute responsibility to control food prices. Unfortunately, ministers and government officials did not always hold the same belief.

During most of the 1740s and 1750s, harvests were good and, automatically, popular unrest died down. However, between 1768 and 1778, a series of bad harvests reignited the situation. These material grievances took on a political dimension because most working people firmly believed that the government should act to control the price of bread to a reasonable level. McPhee reminds us that, in the 'flour war' (see below), rioters shouted that they were bringing down the price of bread 'in the name of the king', which is an expression of their belief that the French king actually had a responsibility to control food prices.

The royal government had accepted the responsibility to control prices, but in the 1760s the government lifted some controls, brought them back in 1770, and later removed them in 1775. This uncertainty reignited a long tradition of popular action and protest. Crowds of urban workers, and sometimes peasants, would gather in public spaces and march to threaten merchants, who bought grain, or bakers, who turned it into bread. Often, the crowd took matters into their own hands by seizing a bakery and selling the bread at what they thought was a fair price; that is, the usual price in times of a good harvest. The crowd did not consider this to be a criminal act: when it came to a family starving, they felt they had a natural right to seize bread. For example, there were serious riots and crowd price-fixing in Nantes in 1768.

Even when price controls were reintroduced in 1770, the measures did not prevent a large, hungry crowd attacking the wealthy city of Bordeaux in 1773. This situation became truly dangerous in 1774–5, when Minister Turgot suddenly lifted all controls completely. He believed that this move would actually improve the supply of flour. This was especially unwise because the harvest of 1774 had been a bad one and food shortages were serious. It led to the flour war of 1775.

The so-called flour war of 1775 broke out just before Louis XVI's coronation. By April 1775, the price of bread in Paris had risen by 50 per cent, which was catastrophic for any working-class family. During April 1775, riots spread across all of the Île-de-France region, disrupted Paris and even threatened the royal palace at



▲ Source 7.20 The uprising known as the flour war in 1775, as depicted in a nineteenth century engraving.

© Cambridge University Press 2021



Versailles. The king had to call out his soldiers to crush the unrest; hundreds of people were imprisoned and two were publicly executed. Other major towns also experienced riots through the 1770s and 1780s.

The government then re-introduced price controls, which kept Paris calm. But, in 1787, after a very good harvest, the government again relaxed price controls and tensions resumed.

William Doyle reminds us that riots over food prices were not primarily opposition to the royal government itself: rioters believed that they were taking action against greedy grain traders, corrupt bakers and so on. This means that the rioters were *not* revolutionaries hoping to overthrow the government, but merely protestors, using crowd action to try to force a change in government policy.

### FOCUS QUESTIONS 7.6

- 1 Why was the price of bread of such critical significance to ordinary working people in France? How could this be 'a matter of life and death' for them?
- 2 What did ordinary working people believe was the responsibility of the king in regards to controlling food prices?

## A new free-trade treaty causes anxiety

There was a significant grievance that did crystallise hostility towards the monarchy or at least to its ministers and their policies. In 1786, the Anglo–French Treaty, also known as The Eden Treaty, was signed. This introduced the idea of free trade between Britain and France, and the removal of the existing restrictions and tariffs that had cut trade between the two countries to very low levels.

The French government, led by Foreign Minister Vergennes, hoped to increase exports of French goods, especially wine, and to boost royal finance by massive customs revenues. This caused more popular unrest, especially among urban workers, who believed that the flood of British goods decreased the sale of their own goods and therefore caused unemployment. There are no reliable figures on this matter, but this common belief created another strand of opposition to the regime in the years before the revolution.

### FOCUS QUESTIONS 7.7

- 1 How did ministers in the government view the issue of controlling food prices?
- 2 Why did the free-trade treaty of 1786 cause anger and anxiety among working people in France?

## The environmental impact of storms in 1788

On 13 July 1788, a massive and destructive storm of unprecedented size and violence tore across a vast area of France from north to south. It rained hailstones so large that some killed birds and small animals; sheets of hailstones cut down the grain crops like an invisible harvester. Branches were ripped off trees, and entire crops of apples and oranges were destroyed in minutes. Valuable grape vines were blasted off their supports, and thousands of fruit trees were likewise stripped and damaged. Valuable vegetable gardens, their beds full of ripe food, were also reduced to a pulp. In one devastating environmental disaster, nearly all the main forms of food were destroyed on a massive scale, meaning that food would be scarce and prices would soar upwards.



▲ Source 7.21 This eighteenth century engraving depicts impoverished farmers impacted by the 1788 storms.

© Cambridge University Press 2021

The environmental impacts did not end with the 1788 storm. The onset of winter later in the year was especially harsh, with the lowest temperatures for decades. Now, the rivers froze, meaning that there was no running water to turn the millwheels. Sacks of grain sat unopened, because it was not possible to grind it into flour to make bread. Heavy falls of snow continued into the first months of 1789, covering areas that did not usually receive snow.

Historian Simon Schama has vividly described and quantified the impact of the bread shortage on working people. In normal times, 75 per cent of French people relied on bread to survive, and on average they spent 50 per cent of their income purchasing it. But now prices soared: from 8 sous (French coins) in mid-1787 to 12 sous by October 1788, and then to 15 sous by February 1789. These loaves of bread weighed four pounds and a family of four would need to buy two of them each day. Yet, a poor worker only earned 20 to 30 sous a day.



The great storm also caused unemployment; thousands of poor workers used to walk from village to village getting casual work bringing in the harvest. Since so much of the harvest was destroyed, there was little work, and the labourers were left penniless and hungry. Schama rightly contends that, by the time it came to asking people to draw up lists of their grievances, these questions were being put to a population largely traumatised by food anxiety and employment anxiety, both caused by these devastating environmental impacts.

## The impact of food prices on the October days

The Parisian crowd was also angered by rising bread prices later in 1789. Prices had temporarily fallen in July and August, but by mid-September had risen again. This was not caused by the king, but by hot weather and a lack of water to turn the mills. Shortages soon caused riots in market places and petitions from women to city authorities to control the rising cost of bread. The events of 5 October 1789 actually began as a protest by market women at the town hall about bread prices, then escalated into a broader campaign against the king and the National Assembly. Lafayette had to use his National Guards to protect bakers' shops.

### THE STORY SO FAR

By mid-1789, it was clear that the popular movement could, and would, take action on its own, both in the cities and in the countryside. The rural popular movement proved that it could cause widespread rebellion, and threaten the security of all landowning people, bourgeois and noble alike. Despite these violent episodes, the revolution was relatively stable, and was ready to define its main principles and then reorganise France based on those ideals.

Use the QR code or visit the Interactive Textbook and watch the video summarising the chapter.





## Develop your historical-thinking skills

### Define key terms

Write your own definition of each of the following key terms:

- Great Fear
- feudalism
- municipal revolution
- *jacquerie*
- Night of Patriotic Delirium.

### Establishing historical significance

Copy this table into your workbook and list the significance of these important revolutionary events.

| Date            | Event                           | What happened?  | What was the significance?              |
|-----------------|---------------------------------|---|---|
| 14 July 1789    | The attack on the Bastille      | The Parisian crowd captures the prison and seizes gunpowder and shot              | <i>This was significant because ...</i> |
| Late July 1789  | The Great Fear                  | Multiple peasant revolts in country areas   | <i>This was significant because ...</i> |
| 4–5 August 1789 | The Night of Patriotic Delirium | The National Assembly initially votes the complete abolition of the feudal system | <i>This was significant because ...</i> |

### Analysing cause and consequence

Using three or four main points, explain the strategic and symbolic importance of the capture of the Bastille to the development of the revolution.

### Constructing historical arguments

- 1 'In the dramatic events of 1789, the most important advances were made in the way people thought about the political system, rather than in the revolutionary action of the crowd, which merely confirmed political developments.' To what extent do you agree with this evaluation of 1789?
- 2 'While revolutions can be driven by new political ideas, they can also be driven by the material and economic problems of the mass of ordinary working people.' Discuss this statement, with reference to the evidence that food anxiety and unemployment were major drivers of revolutionary actions by the crowd during the French Revolution.

## Analysing historian's interpretations

### Gwynne Lewis (1933–2014)

Historian Gwynne Lewis offers this interpretation of the events of 1789:

*The fourteenth of July supplied the [death blow] to absolute monarchy in France. Its significance, however, goes far deeper than this. It provoked, or rather it strengthened, a whole series of mini-revolutions throughout France, as a result of which effective power, administrative and police, passed, in a very messy way, from the supporters of the [old regime] to the 'patriots of 1789' ... However, the corridors of revolutionary power were frequented ... by the propertied and educated classes, amongst whom one could find a good sprinkling of liberal nobles and clerics. Central to an understanding of the French Revolution ... is the fact that those deputies ... were as frightened of the millions of poor, hungry and unemployed [people] as they were of the king. Indeed, if the defence of property and 'law and order' were to be the central issues, as they rapidly became, they needed Louis XVI far more than they needed the propertyless masses.*

**Source 7.22** *The French Revolution: Rethinking the Debate*, 1993, p. 26

- 1 According to Lewis, what was the first and most obvious effect of the capture of the Bastille?
- 2 What sorts of people came to power in 1789?
- 3 The revolutionaries of 1789 certainly had good reason to fear counter-revolution from the king and the nobles. According to Lewis, who else did they have reason to fear?
- 4 The slogans stated that the revolution was about liberty and equality. According to Lewis, what were two other major themes of the revolution?
- 5 From what you know of the events of 1789, is it correct to say that the French Revolution included a struggle between a bourgeois revolution and a popular revolution?
- 6 Although bourgeois deputies might have feared the popular revolutionary movement, they also knew that they could not survive without its support. Why was this so?

## Using quotes as evidence

Write a sentence using a short phrase from one of the quotes below or contrast the views from a few of the quotes. You can also use any of the quotes in the chapter. Any quotes you choose can be used directly or paraphrased into your own words.

### What caused the French Revolution of 1789?

*The revolution of 1789–94 marked the appearance of modern bourgeois and capitalist society in the history of France ... it deserves to be considered the classic model of a bourgeois revolution.*

**Albert Soboul, historian**

*In the French Revolution, it is commonly said, the feudal order passed away and the rule of the bourgeoisie took its place. This is, put simply, the myth which has dominated serious research this century.*

**Alfred Cobban, historian**

*Why then did [the old regime] fall? The answer lies in the fortuitous coincidence of two separate crises at the end of the 1780s. The first crisis was political, deriving from the financial bankruptcy of the monarchy following the French participation in the American War of Independence. The second crisis was economic, stemming most immediately from the harvest failure of 1788 ... It was the fusion of these two crises in 1789 which allowed the mass of discontents to become critical and to turn a crisis into a revolution.*

**Timothy Blanning, historian**

# Area of Study 2

## Consequences of revolution: Challenges and responses, changes and continuity, significant individuals and experiences of groups in France, 5 August 1789 to 2 November 1795

*The remaking of France was based on a belief in the common identity of French citizens whatever their social or geographic origin. This was a fundamental change in the relationship between the state, its provinces and the citizenry. In every aspect of public life – administration, the judiciary, the armed forces, the Church, policing – traditions of corporate rights, appointment and hierarchy gave way to civil equality, accountability and elections within national structures.*

Peter McPhee, 2002

### Overview

The common image of the French Revolution as a time of violent crowd action, Terror and the use of the guillotine is so powerful that we often forget how relatively peaceful the revolution was for its first few years, and how very constructive it proved to be. The first French Revolution was essentially a three-part project. Politically, the aim was to create a constitutional monarchy, with the king in charge of government but responsible to a parliament. Civically, the aim was to define the basic rights to be enjoyed by all people, including equality before the law, in taxation and in the workplace. Administratively, the aim was to reorganise all the government, Church and legal structures of France, clearing away the jumbled, inefficient structures of the old regime. Between 1789 and 1791, all of these aims were successfully achieved, creating not only a new society, but also the very foundations of the modern France we know today.

There were further revolutionary events in 1789, notably the peasant rebellion in the countryside (July and August) and the dramatic march of the crowd to Versailles to force the royal family to return to Paris (October). By 1790, reform was well underway and many problems mentioned in the Books of Grievances were remedied by bold changes that nobody had suggested previously.

However, one reform caused unexpected resistance. The reform of the Catholic Church, though much needed and generally well implemented, caused resistance from a majority of the clergy, creating the first major controversy of the revolution. The bitter struggle between government and priests touched off a fateful train of events, in which the king attempted to flee France but was caught, brought back and subjected to the anger of the popular movement. While the National Assembly worked hard to save the constitutional monarchy – and hence the monarch – the popular movement protested, until fired upon in the Champ de Mars Massacre. By late 1791, it was clear that the revolution was not over and, indeed, that it would go on to cause far more serious conflict.

The second – radical – stage of the French Revolution began on 10 August 1792, when the revolutionary crowd invaded the king's palace. The most important aspect of this second period was France's involvement in a war with a number of powerful European countries, such as Austria, Prussia, and later Britain and Spain.

This 'war emergency' had two important effects. First, it radicalised the revolutionary movement, causing the *sans-culottes* (militant working-class members forming the crowd) to insist on strong measures to win the war and assure food supplies. Second, it pushed the new assembly, the National Convention, into introducing 'revolutionary government', or special committees with strong powers, to deal with the emergency situation.

The Terror was the legal use of imprisonment and execution, approved by the government itself, to deal with enemies of the revolution. It claimed 30 000 victims. The use of Terror is disturbing because it destroyed many of the legal principles of personal liberty stated in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. It also expanded from being a measure against the enemies of the revolution to being an attack on nearly all other political groups other than the ruling Montagnards, made up of members of the Jacobin and Cordeliers clubs. This would, finally, create a movement to end the Terror, which resulted in the events of Thermidor and

the overthrow of the Jacobins. By 1795, France would settle for a third constitution, creating a more moderate republic known as the Executive Directory.

The chapters in Area of Study 2 are designed to help students understand the consequences of the revolutionary events of 1789.



◀ Source 8A An emblem of the Republic from 1793

## Timeline of key events, 5 August 1789 to November 1795

### 1789

- ▶ **4–11 August:** The National Assembly initially abolishes feudalism outright, then qualifies the reform ('August Decrees')
- ▶ **26 August:** Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen
- ▶ **September:** The National Assembly votes to give the king suspensive veto and not to have a two-house parliament
- ▶ **5–6 October:** The October Days – the king, the royal family and then the National Assembly move to Paris
- ▶ **2 November:** Nationalisation of Church property

### 1790

- ▶ **13 February:** Abolition of religious orders apart from teaching and medical services
- ▶ **26 February:** Rationalisation of France into 83 administrative departments
- ▶ **21 May:** Creation of the municipal 'sections' of Paris
- ▶ **19 June:** Abolition of nobility and all other honorific distinctions
- ▶ **12 July:** The Civil Constitution of the Clergy is decreed
- ▶ **14 July:** Lafayette's Festival of Federation
- ▶ **August:** Reorganisation of judiciary; abolition of *parlements*
- ▶ **4–6 September:** National Assembly assumes control of national treasury and abolishes law courts of old regime
- ▶ **27 November:** National Assembly demands that priests swear oath of loyalty to Civil Constitution of Clergy

### 1791

- ▶ **January:** Checking of oath of the clergy
- ▶ **March:** Abolition of guilds and corporations
- ▶ **13 April:** The Pope condemns the Civil Constitution of the Clergy
- ▶ **18 April:** The crowd violently prevents the royal family from leaving Paris for Saint-Cloud
- ▶ **14 June:** The Le Chapelier law restricts working-class organisation, including strikes
- ▶ **20–21 June:** The flight of the royal family to Varennes
- ▶ **25 June:** Royal family returns to Paris, but the Assembly only suspends the king
- ▶ **16 July:** The king is reinstated
- ▶ **17 July:** Petition, demonstration and massacre on the Champ de Mars
- ▶ **25 July:** European nations form a coalition against revolutionary France
- ▶ **14 August:** Rebellion of slaves in the French colony of Saint-Domingue
- ▶ **27 August:** Declaration of Pillnitz
- ▶ **13–14 September:** The king approves the Constitution (1791) and swears loyalty to the nation; the first parliament, the National Constituent Assembly, is dissolved
- ▶ **1 October:** Meeting of the second parliament, the Legislative Assembly

▲ **Source 8B** Painting by eighteenth century artist Hubert Robert of the Fête de la Fédération, July 14 1790



- ▶ **20 October:** Brissot first suggests revolutionary war
- ▶ **November:** National Assembly orders emigrated nobles to return or lose their property
- ▶ **25 November:** National Assembly decrees Committees of Surveillance
- ▶ **29 November:** National Assembly renews order to refractory priests to take the oath of loyalty

## 1792

- ▶ **25 January:** France makes an ultimatum to Austria
- ▶ **20 April:** France declares war on Austria
- ▶ **25 April:** First use of the guillotine
- ▶ **27 May:** National Assembly passes new law against refractory priests
- ▶ **13 June:** The Brissotin ministry is dismissed; Prussia declares war on France
- ▶ **20 June:** The first revolutionary upheaval – the *sans-culottes* invade the Tuileries Palace and humiliate the king
- ▶ **11 July:** Decree of the Country in Danger
- ▶ **25 July:** The Brunswick Manifesto
- ▶ **30 July:** Federal troops (volunteers from Marseille) arrive in Paris
- ▶ **3 August:** The radical Paris 'sections' demand that the king be dethroned
- ▶ **10 August:** The second revolutionary upheaval – the crowd invades the Tuileries and overthrows the monarchy
- ▶ **17 August:** The Extraordinary Tribunal is established
- ▶ **19 August:** Lafayette defects; Prussian troops cross the border into France
- ▶ **2 September:** Prussians capture Verdun, the last fortress before Paris
- ▶ **2–6 September:** Panic in Paris – 'September Massacres' of prisoners
- ▶ **21 September:** The third parliament, the National Convention, meets
- ▶ **22 September:** The Republic is proclaimed
- ▶ **3–26 December:** The king is brought to trial, interrogated and makes his defence

## 1793

- ▶ **7–18 January:** Condemnation of the king, passing of death sentence and vote against reprieve
- ▶ **20 January:** First political assassination – Le Pelletier
- ▶ **21 January:** Execution of the king
- ▶ **1 February:** France declares war on Great Britain and the Dutch Republic
- ▶ **24 February:** Assembly decrees conscription of an army of 300 000 men
- ▶ **10 March:** Creation of the Revolutionary Tribunal
- ▶ **11 March:** Rebellion in the Vendée region begins
- ▶ **21 March:** Creation of revolutionary committees
- ▶ **6 April:** Creation of Committee of Public Safety
- ▶ **13–24 April:** Unsuccessful attempt by Girondins to try Marat
- ▶ **29 April:** Federalist rebellion in Marseille
- ▶ **4 May:** Convention decrees the Law of Maximum on food prices
- ▶ **20 May:** Appointment of the Commission of Twelve

- ▶ **31 May:** Popular uprising in Paris against the Girondins
- ▶ **2 June:** Popular pressure leads to the purge of Girondins from the Convention
- ▶ **24 June:** The 'Jacobin' Constitution of 1793 is accepted by the Convention
- ▶ **10 July:** Danton quits the Committee of Public Safety
- ▶ **13 July:** Second political assassination – the death of Marat
- ▶ **26 July:** The Economic Terror – the death penalty is introduced for hoarding
- ▶ **27 July:** Robespierre accepts membership of the Committee of Public Safety
- ▶ **23 August:** Decree of mass levy of troops
- ▶ **5 September:** The National Convention bows to popular pressure to introduce government by Terror
- ▶ **8 September:** The Battle of Hondschoote – a turning point for the French war effort
- ▶ **17 September:** The Law of Suspects facilitates arrest on almost any pretext
- ▶ **29 September:** The Law of Maximum is made general (The Law of the General Maximum)
- ▶ **10 October:** Declaration of 'revolutionary government' (government by emergency measures)
- ▶ **24–31 October:** Trial of the Girondins, culminating in their execution
- ▶ **4 December:** Formal decree of revolutionary government

### 1794

- ▶ **4 February:** Successful rebellion in Saint-Domingue forces Convention to abolish slavery
- ▶ **13–24 March:** Arrest and execution of the left-wing radical Hébertists
- ▶ **27 March:** Disbanding of revolutionary armies
- ▶ **5 April:** Trial and execution of Danton and Desmoulins
- ▶ **8 June:** Festival of the Supreme Being
- ▶ **5 July:** Introduction of wage controls in Paris
- ▶ **27–28 July:** Fall of Robespierre and close associates (9–10 Thermidor, in the new dating)

### 1795

- ▶ **March:** Trial of Jacobins such as Billaud-Varenne
- ▶ **1–2 April:** The rebellion of Germinal
- ▶ **20–23 May:** The rebellion of Prairial
- ▶ **22 August:** Constitution of 1795
- ▶ **5 October:** Rebellion of Vendémiaire
- ▶ **26 October:** The National Convention closes down
- ▶ **2 November:** The Executive Directory is established

▲ **Source 8C** Departure of the volunteers for the army in 1792, as depicted in the nineteenth century by painter Edouard Detaille.





# 8

## **THE DEVELOPMENT OF SIGNIFICANT REVOLUTIONARY IDEAS, 1789–91**

*The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen revealed an attention to practical realities as well as to current ideologies. It provided a powerful tangible revolutionary gospel.*

– J.H. STEWART, 1971

## Overview

While the revolutionary movement provides the energy and force of a revolution and leaders that attempt to guide its course, it is revolutionary ideas that state the basic principles of the new society.



In France, there was a rich inheritance of ideas, including the older ideas of the Enlightenment, the more recent American ideas of egalitarianism and representation, the development of ‘patriot’ ideas in the 1780s, and the recent practical suggestions of the Books of Grievances. Rarely have revolutionaries had such a varied body of ideas upon which to draw, although these ideas did not form an ideology (a system of ideas) comparable to Marxist-Leninism in Russia. The events of 1789 made it necessary to clearly define the revolution’s basic principles. This amalgam of ideas would in turn be used to formulate firm principles in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen and the August Decrees.

## Key issues

- What was the significance of the August Decrees?
- What were the terms of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen?
- What were the principles of the men and women of 1789?
- What were the debates about the Declaration?
- What changes to laws and taxes took place from 1789–91?

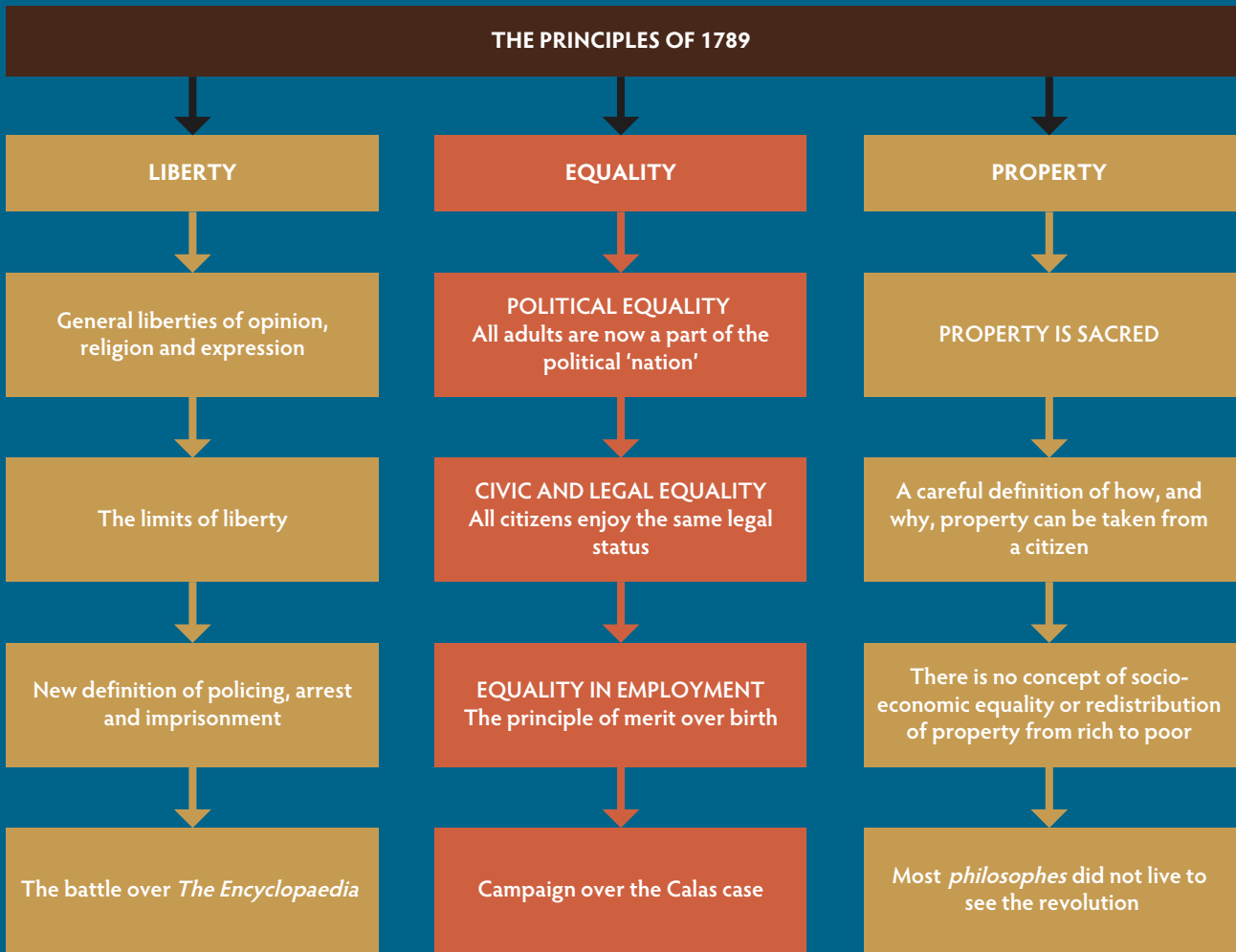
## Digital resources for this chapter

In the *Interactive Textbook*:

-  video and audio sources and questions
-  digital activities.

◀ **Source 8.0** This oil painting is an allegorical representation of the Declaration, as painted by Jean-Baptiste Regnault.

# Flow of chapter



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# Chapter timeline

**11 JULY 1789**  
Lafayette consults Thomas Jefferson on his version of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen

**26 AUGUST 1789**  
Publication of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen



**16 MARCH 1790**  
Abolition of lettres de cachet



**11 AUGUST 1789**  
The August Decrees are published

**NOVEMBER 1789**  
Church property is nationalised



**AUGUST 1791**  
The Saint-Domingue (Haitian) Revolution begins

## 8.1 The August Decrees and the abolition of feudalism

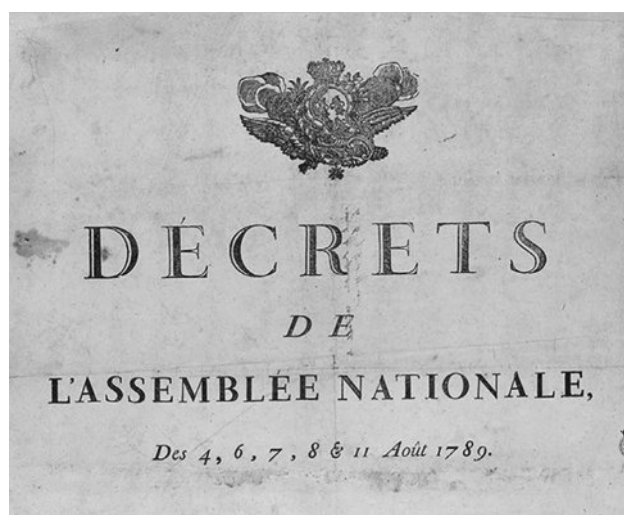
The August Decrees are more complicated than they appear. The document begins with the absolute statement: ‘The National Assembly abolishes the feudal regime entirely.’ This expresses the sentiment felt on the Night of Patriotic Delirium – the momentous meeting of 4–5 August 1789 – when the decrees were originally written. The statement was in response to a spreading wave of peasants’ violent attacks on landlord property in July to August 1789. Most deputies of the National Assembly both owned land and believed that property was sacred, so they criticised the peasants as criminals. A more radical pressure group, vaguely known as the Patriot Party, pushed for an abolition of Catholic Church tithes and feudal dues.

Historian Michael Sibalís usefully reminds us that the word ‘feudalism’ was used to describe two different things. First, it meant the system by which a peasant owed payments of money, goods and labour to the lord who owned his land (one noble, the Vicomte de Noailles, urged on the Night of Patriotic Delirium that these should be abolished). Second, ‘feudalism’ was applied more generally to the mean the entire system of privilege of the old regime in France (the group called the Breton Club pushed successfully on 4 August for the abolition of all privileges). Sibalís notes that both types of feudalism were abolished by this original document.

However, the true timeframe of the document’s writing is 6–11 August 1789, during which time some reforms originally written on the Night of Patriotic Delirium were modified. As the deputies realised how much they stood to lose, they introduced a distinction between feudal dues on *people* (such as labour service), which could be abolished, and feudal dues on *land*, which they argued were a form of property and could not be taken from people.

Therefore, Article 6 of the August Decrees firmly states: ‘All ground rents, to whatever people they are due, shall be redeemable.’ To compensate the owner of the land, a peasant would have to pay a massive sum – between 20 and 25 times the annual payment – in order to be free. In reality, few peasants could pay such an enormous sum.

Nonetheless, the decrees did abolish some serious abuses. Article 9 established equality before taxation: ‘Privileges in matters of taxation are abolished forever.’ Venal public office was abolished so that people could no longer ‘buy’ a job and the Catholic Church’s tithe was also abolished, saving peasants some 8–10 per cent of their income.



▲ Source 8.1 The content that is in the August Decrees was written from 6 to 11 August in 1789.

### FOCUS QUESTIONS 8.1

- 1 Why did the National Assembly make the panicky decision to ‘abolish the feudal system’?
- 2 Why and how did the deputies modify their hasty decision?

## 8.2 The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen

The title of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen refers to a tradition of thought predating the revolution. Its authors drew upon the strongest strand of political thinking in the eighteenth-century world, based on the philosophy of law and the concept of the social contract.

The Declaration proposed that human beings were ‘naturally’ born with certain rights and that they retained them when they moved from nature to a state of civilisation. The authors of the Declaration did not create new human rights, but described rights that enlightened people thought already existed. The stirring opening words are based on the belief that these rights existed and that when societies ignore these rights, they risk despotism.

The Declaration proclaimed the great principles so they could never be forgotten. This legislation was not to create new rights, but to acknowledge those rights that the *philosophes* had established. They stated these general principles while awaiting the longer completion of the constitution.

There was general agreement about the need for the Declaration, because it was debated and adopted in the space of only one week, from 20 to 26 August 1789. The document was not meant to be the instrument to create the new society into existence, but an early statement of the basic principles upon which this society was to be built.

## 8.3 The principles of the men and women of 1789

The first calls for a Declaration of universal human rights occurred early in 1789 in the Books of Grievances of the Third Estate and the liberal nobility. On 11 July 1789, Lafayette read his suggestion for a declaration to the National Assembly after consulting with the American Thomas Jefferson. Other deputies were evidently interested, for there were at least 20 substantial drafts submitted, including one by Abbé Sieyès.

What are the principles recognised by the final Declaration? Article 2 defines the innate human rights as ‘liberty, property, security and resistance to oppression’. When human beings surrender their individual freedom to a society that exercises political power, society has a responsibility to protect their natural rights. Article 4 defines liberty as the freedom to do whatever you like, providing it does not harm another person or their liberty. Article 10 defines specific liberties, including the freedom to hold opinions. It defines religious belief as an individual’s free choice. Article 11 guarantees the freedom to express those beliefs in speech, writing or print.

The theme of individual rights is strongly counterbalanced by the theme of **legality**. Article 6 defines law as the expression of the general will, which can be expressed by the direct *or* indirect participation of all citizens. Article 3 repeats that sovereignty rests with the nation. Article 2 restates John Locke’s important idea that people only surrender their individual freedom to a government so that it might work to protect their lives and their property; logically, once a government has ceased to protect their lives and property, that implicit contract has been broken and the government is no longer fulfilling its original purpose. The rule of law means the absolute right to own property; Article 17 makes property inviolable, meaning it cannot be taken from the individual by the state, except by exceptional legal methods.

**legality** the rule of law

### FOCUS QUESTIONS 8.2

- 1 What was the reason for writing a Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen in 1789, when the constitution was still unfinished?
- 2 What are the main principles of the Declaration?





▲ Source 8.2 This painting by Le Barbier, from 1789, shows the text of the Declaration made into monumental form – as if cast in stone.

## 8.4 Key concepts of the Declaration

### Ideas: The influence of the Books of Grievances

Many aspects of the Declaration respond to the ideas stated in the Books of Grievances, particularly those written by bourgeois lawyers of the Third Estate and liberal nobles of the Second Estate.

### Ideas: Equality

The idea of **equality** means *political* equality – all people are now citizens in the political body – and *civic and legal* equality, meaning that all people will receive uniform legal treatment. It does not mean social or economic equality. There was no plan to change society or to redistribute wealth more evenly. However, the Declaration did eliminate fiscal privilege; Article 13 insisted that taxation be apportioned fairly to all citizens and varied according to their ability to pay.

**equality** all people receive uniform legal treatment and are part of a political body

### Ideas: Merit and utility

The first article is not about liberty or equality but the third great theme of the revolution, utility. It translates into law the great Third Estate principle of merit and utility over birth and privilege, creating **equality of opportunity**. Article 1 accepts that people will be unequal, but now inequality has a different basis; your social rank will depend on your skills and achievements. Article 6 translates this general principle into practice; that is, all citizens must have equal access to public office, based not upon their birth but upon their merit.

**equality of opportunity** merit and utility over birth and privilege

#### FOCUS QUESTIONS 8.3

- 1 What are the main ideas of the Declaration?
- 2 Why were the deputies afraid that the Declaration might become too radical?

► **Source 8.3** This painting illustrates the revolutionary principle that from now on all the orders in France shall be equal in rights and responsibilities.



### Stormy debates about a 'radical' Declaration

The finished document gives no sign of the angry debates and disputes that surrounded its creation. The Declaration was not as self-evident as it claimed to be. On 12 August 1789, the National Assembly appointed a committee of five, headed by Mirabeau, to choose the best draft, but this proved moderate and favoured one of the weakest statements of all. More radical deputies pressured the National Assembly to accept a compilation of the best clauses from a number of documents.

Even so, the Declaration we know today was modified by propertied men to ensure that it did not give ordinary people unrealistic hopes of social change. The statements about natural law were substantially

weakened to prevent the poor and those without property from becoming too **radicalised**. The clause about freedom of religious belief was heavily modified because the deputies thought the traditional Catholic religion was a good instrument for controlling ordinary people.

Despite being a momentous statement of human rights, the Declaration has some important silences. It is silent on social welfare, making no mention of the nation's responsibility to aid the poor and unemployed. It follows Rousseau's emphasis on law as the expression of the general will, but ignores what is allowed for those who disagree with the general will. It does not guarantee individuals' right to group action, to freedom of association – even for a trade union – or the rights of petition or assembly.



▲ **Source 8.4** Mirabeau was appointed to select the best draft of the Declaration, but received criticism for his choice.

**radicalised** having adopted radical political views

## 8.5 The abolition of slavery

The men and women who believed in the principle of natural rights firmly believed that all human beings without exception had a right to liberty, and for this reason opposed slavery. But, the men who drafted the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen in August 1789 did not proceed to abolish slavery, simply because they could not; French colonies such as Saint-Domingue (modern Haiti) relied heavily on African slave labour in their many wealthy plantations, which provided a large proportion of France's economic wealth. To have abolished slavery would have decimated France's entire economy. Therefore, the slaves had to fight for their own freedom, and in doing so they created a slave version of the French Revolution that was far more violent and bloody than the one on French soil. Indeed, as historian William Doyle put it, 'the impact on the colony itself was volcanic', because it inspired both slaves and free people of colour to demand the rights that had not been extended to them.

After two bloody rebellions by free people of colour (in March and October of 1790), the French National Assembly voted rights for this group (initially in May 1791, then expanded in April 1792). In August 1791, a massive slave army of 100 000 slaves rose in rebellion in Saint-Domingue, slaughtering the white plantation owners and their supporters. It is a sad fact that the National Assembly did not at first abolish slavery on the grounds of principle.

However, Léger Sonthonax did. He was a special commissioner, who had been sent to Saint-Domingue to stabilise the situation. The French colony was threatened by France's enemy Spain and rather than lose Saint-Domingue altogether, Sonthonax offered freedom in June 1793 to slaves who helped defend it from the Spanish. Later, in August 1793 he simply announced that all slavery was abolished on Saint-Domingue. Fortunately, the parliament at the time, the National Convention, approved his decision in January 1794. They, too, were desperate to gain control of the wealthy Caribbean area, and to defeat British and Spanish influence there. Later, the National Convention passed their own decree abolishing slavery in all French colonies (February 1794).

To acquaint yourself with the little-known history of this slave version of the French Revolution (also known today as the Haitian Revolution), please refer to the essay published on *Cambridge GO* accompanying this publication.

▼ **Source 8.5** Toussaint L'Ouverture (1743–1803) was a leader of the Haitian Revolution. British-Trinidadian historian C.L.R. James tracks the influence and interplay of the French Revolution with the Haitian Revolution in his 1938 book *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*.



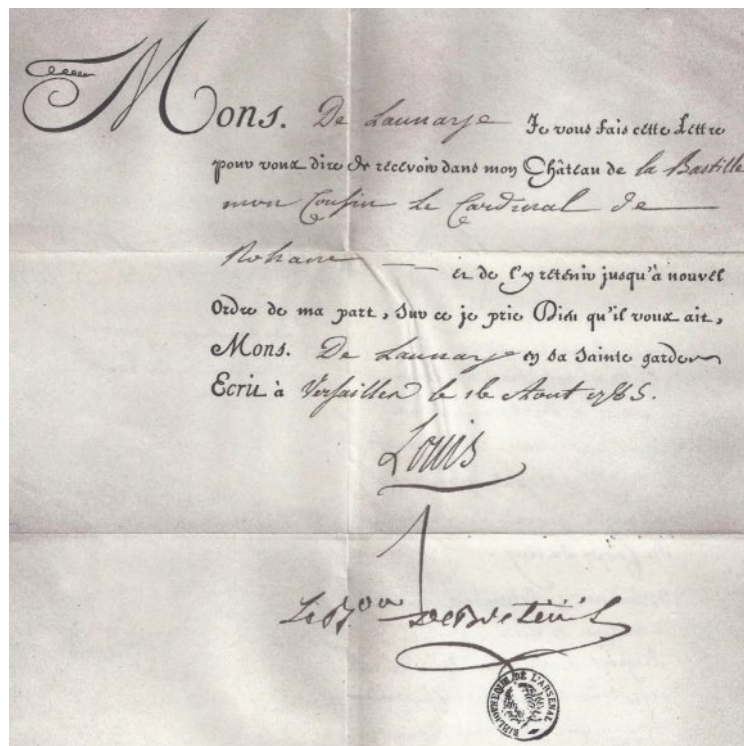


▲ Source 8.6 An engraving depicting the slaves revolting in Saint-Domingue

## 8.6 Initial changes to laws and taxes

The first wave of reforms of laws and taxes was made by the National Constituent Assembly, which was formed in 1789 from the National Assembly. The changes mainly aimed to firmly establish three of the most important principles of the revolution: personal liberty, equality before the law and equality before taxation. In doing so, the reforms would demolish forever the arbitrary treatment of the individual under the old regime (such as the *lettres de cachet*), and eliminate the massive inequalities in the legal systems and the taxation structures of the old regime. In one sweep, the National Constituent Assembly removed the forest of privileges formerly enjoyed by nobles and clergy.

► Source 8.7 An example of the *lettres de cachet* abolished by Articles 7–9 of the Declaration. This example is from 1785, and is an order for the arrest of Cardinal de Rohan for his role in the Diamond Necklace Affair, signed by Louis XVI. The cardinal was to be imprisoned in the Bastille.



## A new, rational system of law

The changes were both extensive and profound. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen codified these general principles into explicit law. The delivery of law was itself changed by the new laws. All citizens would now be tried by one, uniform legal system; the old special courts for nobles and clergy were abolished. So, too, were the *parlements* or high law courts, which were disbanded on 17 August 1789.

## Universal, proportional taxation

Article 13 of the Declaration had established that taxation must be ‘apportioned equally among all citizens according to their ability to pay’. The initial reorganisation of taxes fell first on dues, such as feudal payments and church tithes, because of the August Decrees. Then, direct taxes on a person’s income were abolished and replaced by a more rational system. Three new direct taxes were created instead. One was a tax on wealth in the form of land. Another was a tax on moveable property. The third was a tax on profits from trade and commerce. Henceforth, it was completely illegal for any individual to have exemption from these taxes for any reason other than poverty.

## Abolition of indirect taxes

Indirect taxation, such as on food and other goods, was also abolished. This was mainly because the people of Paris had wrecked the tax wall and its gates; elsewhere in France, they just refused to pay – sometimes violently. Between 1790–91, the salt tax, tobacco levy and taxation gates were all abolished.

### THE STORY SO FAR



By the time the National Constituent Assembly had finished drafting the legal documents, it had sweepingly abolished all the privileges of the old regime. Special legal privileges were gone. Taxation privileges were gone. And the culture of deference had disappeared.

The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen had brought into legal existence a whole new world in which every citizen was assured of natural rights. A parliamentary democracy would represent the general will and any form of privilege was illegal. The August Decrees had repeated many of these basic principles and had abolished the Catholic Church’s tithe, as well as partially abolishing the feudal system.

The great ideas and principles of the Enlightenment – the separation of powers, the principle of social utility and merit over noble rank – had now been transformed from glowing ideals on paper into the firm legal realities of a new nation. As the *philosophes* had dreamed, human life was transformed forever by the principles of reason, tolerance and humanity.

Use the QR code or visit the Interactive Textbook and watch the video summarising the chapter.





## Develop your historical-thinking skills

### Establishing historical significance

To what extent were the August Decrees, created 4–11 August 1789, an effective response to peasant concerns listed in the Books of Grievances?

### Using historical terms meaningfully

Write an extended paragraph explaining the extent to which the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen written in August 1789 created the new society by abolishing political, social, economic and legal aspects of the old regime. Use the following phrases and terms to show you understand their meaning and context:

- the rule of law
- abolition of arbitrary justice
- equality
- liberty
- merit over birth.

### Constructing historical arguments

‘In the French Revolution, ideas of legality, property and utility were as important as the key revolutionary terms of liberty and equality.’ Discuss this while referencing the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen.

### Analysing historian’s interpretations

#### Peter McPhee (1948– )

In 2002, historian Peter McPhee wrote:

*[The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen] represented the end of the absolutist, seigneurial and corporate structure of eighteenth-century France. [It] was also a revolutionary proclamation of the principles of a new golden age ... While universal in its language, and resounding in its optimism, it was nonetheless ambiguous in its wording and silences. That is, while proclaiming the universality of rights and the civic equality of all citizens, the Declaration was ambiguous on whether the propertyless, slaves and women would have political as well as legal equality, and silent on how the means to exercise one’s talents could be secured by those without education and property.*

**Source 8.8** Peter McPhee, *The French Revolution, 1789–1799*, p. 59

- 1 What exactly was abolished when the Declaration ended ‘the absolutist, seigneurial and corporate structure’ of France?
- 2 Why does McPhee see a contradiction between the Declaration’s ‘universal’ ideas and the range of people who actually benefited from it?

## Using quotes as evidence

Write a sentence using a short phrase from one of the quotes below or contrast the views from a few of the quotes. You can also use any of the quotes in the chapter. Any quotes you choose can be used directly or paraphrased into your own words.

### August Decrees

[The decrees] *were more a concession to the needs of the moment than the sign of a real desire to satisfy the grievances of the peasantry.*

**Albert Soboul, historian**

*But those same aristocrats also had a consistent history of lending serious support to the cause of patriotic liberty ... One should not judge their famous intervention ... as a cynical attempt to save something from the wreckage.*

**Simon Schama, historian**

[The decrees were designed for] *containing mounting disorder, the risk of an attack on all forms of property and the catastrophe for state finances of a continuing tax strike.*

**Donald Sutherland, historian**

[The decrees] *transformed a country of subjects divided by privilege into a united nation of citizens equal before and under the law. It marks the end of the old regime and the birth of modern France.*

**Samuel Scott and Barry Rothaus, writers of the *Historical Dictionary of the French Revolution, 1789–1799***

### The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen

*Proclaiming liberty, equality and national sovereignty, the text was in effect [the death certificate] of the old regime, which had been put to death by popular revolution.*

**Georges Lefebvre**

[The Declaration] *has been looked to ever since by all who derive inspiration from the French Revolution as the movement's first great manifesto, enshrining the fundamental principles of 1789.*

**William Doyle**

[The Declaration] *was an extraordinary document, one of the most powerful statements of liberalism and representative government ... nonetheless ambiguous in its words and silences.*

**Peter McPhee**



# 9

## THE ROLE OF POPULAR MOVEMENTS, 1789–91

*The 'popular' revolution of 1789 quite naturally falls into two main parts: that associated with the peasants and that with the urban sans-culottes. Though sharing common political background, each had its own distinctive origin and mode of behaviour.*

– GEORGE RUDÉ, 1988



## Overview

Most definitions of ‘revolution’ agree that it must involve some mass movement; without a popular following, it is merely a coup d’état, in which a small group seizes power by armed force.

One definition of ‘the crowd’ was given by Marie-Antoinette, who believed that the good common people loved their king and that the revolutionary crowd comprised a desperate rabble manipulated by criminal revolutionary leaders.



For some time, historians knew little about the role of the popular movement in the French Revolution, assuming that the crowd was indeed just a ‘rabble’ of desperately poor people. However, Marxist historians developed sophisticated methods of studying the membership and motives of revolutionary crowds.

## Key issues

- What is meant by a revolutionary movement?
- How did the revolutionary movement form in France?
- Do leaders control revolutionary movements?
- How did the revolutionary movement express its ideas?

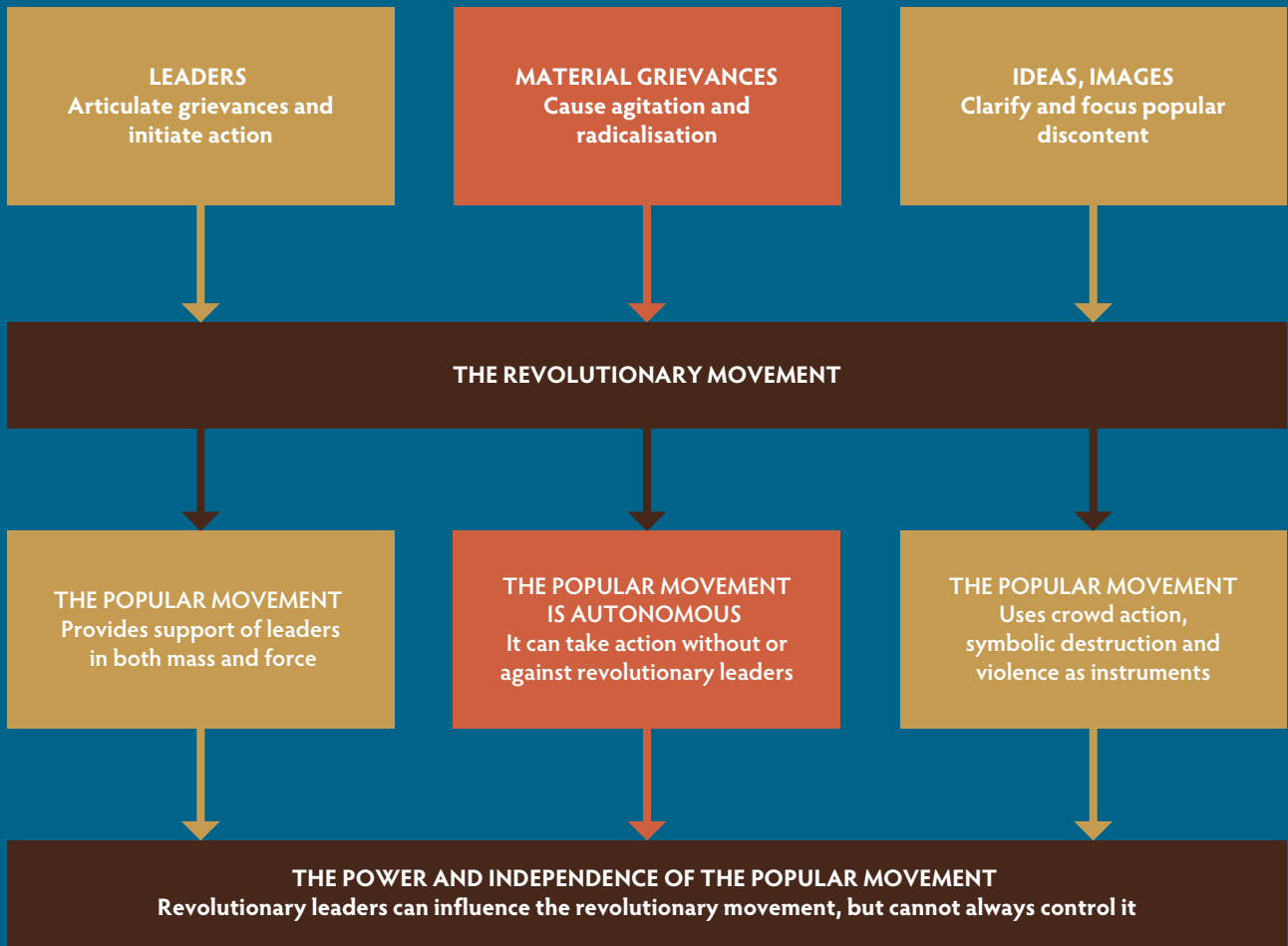
## Digital resources for this chapter

In the *Interactive Textbook*:

-  video and audio sources and questions
-  digital activities.

◀ **Source 9.0** A depiction of the women’s march on Versailles, also known as ‘the October Days’.

# Flow of chapter



150

# Chapter timeline

**12 JULY 1789**

*Camille Desmoulins urges the Parisian crowd to arm itself to resist royal intimidation*



**FEBRUARY 1790**

*Significant growth in political clubs*



**AUGUST 1789**

*The August Decrees*

**14 JULY 1789**

*The storming of the Bastille and death of de Launay*



**OCTOBER 1789**

*The women's march to Versailles (October Days)*



**14 JULY 1790**

*Festival of Federation*

## 9.1 What is meant by a revolutionary movement?

The historian George Rudé, influenced by Karl Marx, argued that we must understand what types of people made up the revolutionary crowd and what motivations drove them to action. In his classic text *The Crowd in the French Revolution* (1959), he showed that the crowd was not usually made up of desperately poor people, although material problems such as the price of food certainly motivated them.

Rudé discovered that the revolutionary crowd contained a large range of people, from the working classes to the lower bourgeoisie. Most were employed and socially respectable, including artisans (skilled craftsmen), master artisans (those who ran a workshop), small shopkeepers and small traders (such as wine merchants), minor government officials, and journalists. The crowd also included unskilled labourers and working women.

## 9.2 The formation of a revolutionary movement in France

Long before 1789, ordinary working people knew how to protest. In both city and country, workers had a strong tradition of crowd action, usually prompted by food issues and directed against the nearest cause of these problems. However, during the 1780s this tradition of crowd action changed, because urban workers participated in national political affairs, such as the conflict between Louis XVI and the *parlements*. Working people read the remonstrances published by the *parlements* and demonstrated in favour of the courts. By June and July 1788, these crowds were exercising their power by taking over cities to support the *parlements*.

As early as the drafting of the Books of Grievances in 1789, working people throughout France followed news of events in Paris and expected that the revolution would solve their urgent problems. But, by 1791, they realised that bourgeois deputies had ignored workers' material problems. Thereafter, the popular movement both defended the revolution and challenged it by demanding economic policies to benefit working people. The women's march to Versailles (also known as 'the October Days') is an example of the formation of a revolutionary movement in France. The next section outlines this formation as a case study.

## 9.3 Case study: The October Days or women's march to Versailles, 1789

The women's march to Versailles was a crucial strategic moment in the French Revolution; it is an example of a revolutionary movement forming. While safe at Versailles, Louis XVI could still order troops to close the National Constituent Assembly. The assembly could not force the king to come to Paris without using popular action. Until now, women had been mainly concerned with subsistence (having enough food to keep a family alive), but now this expanded to politics. To secure the revolution, bread prices must fall, and this could only occur if Louis XVI was forced back to Paris.

By September 1789, the price of bread was rising again, causing popular disturbances in Paris and throughout France. The newly formed National Guard, created to protect property, prevented angry crowds from attacking shops, especially bakeries. The king recovered some of his defiance. He ordered the loyal Flanders Regiment to Versailles and, once protected by reliable troops, challenged the principles of the revolution. He rejected the August Decrees on 18 September and questioned the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen on 4 October. There were rumours of a feast for his bodyguard and the Flanders Regiment, where he refused to toast the revolution. His officers threw the revolutionary **cockade** on the floor and trampled it.

People concluded that the aristocrats were planning retaliation.

**cockade** a bundle of ribbons in the revolutionary colours of blue, white and red, to be worn on a coat or hat to show that you were a patriot



▲ **Source 9.1** This engraving is a representation of the women's march to Versailles on 5–6 October 1789. The artist correctly shows that some members of the crowd were men dressed as women.

On 5 October, working women gathered in the markets, then invaded the town hall. Deciding that the only way to stop an aristocratic attack was to bring the king back to Paris, they harnessed cannons and marched to Versailles.

On arrival, the 7000 marchers invaded the National Constituent Assembly. Would their demands be political issues or material concerns? They demanded both that the price of bread be reduced and that the officers who had trampled the cockade be punished. The deputies were powerless. The demonstrators were militant working women and the threats they shouted at the deputies were full of obscenities, sexual taunts and death threats.

Later, the women invaded the king's chambers and the royal guards opened fire; in the chaos, the king and queen were nearly killed. Lafayette arrived with his National Guard, but barely controlled this popular revolution: it was



► **Source 9.2** This is a representation of the violence and chaos in the palace of Versailles, when the market women invaded the building

## ANALYSIS ACTIVITY 9.1: READING A PRIMARY SOURCE



### The violent action of women at Versailles

Mrs Henry Swinburne wrote from Versailles to her husband in England:

*We have had dreadful doings. On the 6th, at night, a set of wretches forced themselves into the chateau, screaming, 'The head of the queen! Down with the queen! Louis will no longer be king! We want the Duke of Orleans – that one will give us bread!' Monsieur Durepaire, one of the royal bodyguard, defended the queen's door and was killed. Others took his place and were thrown down. 'Save the queen' was the cry of the royal bodyguard. Madame Thibaud awoke the queen, who threw a coverlet of the bed over her and ran into the king's room, and shortly after she was gone, her door was burst open. The king ran and fetched his son, and all together they awaited the event. They owed their rescue to M. de La Fayette and the French Guard. He insisted on the king taking up residence in Paris, without which he could not promise him safety.*

**Source 9.3** Adapted from the original document in Leonard Cowie, *The French Revolution*, 1987, p. 62

- 1 What evidence is there that the lives of the royal family were in danger?
- 2 What seemed to be the main grievance driving these women to this action?
- 3 What evidence is there that Lafayette was not certain that he could control this situation, even with his troops present?

more by chance that the king was saved, because he ducked down a secret passageway seconds before the angry demonstrators burst into his room.

The following day, the crowd accompanied the royal family back to Paris. The market women triumphantly carried sacks of flour from the royal cellars, chanting that they had brought back the royal family, or 'the baker, the baker's wife and the baker's boy'. Strategically, they had consolidated the revolution. The National Constituent Assembly also moved to Paris, so both the king and the 'revolutionary government' were now located in the capital. The two were now controlled by a third force: the Parisian crowd.

► **Source 9.4** This 1789 engraving celebrates the return of the royal family to Paris.



## 9.4 Do leaders control the revolutionary movement?

One of the most common images of the popular movement is of a crowd being stirred into action by a revolutionary leader, such as Camille Desmoulin calling on the crowd to arm itself on 12 July 1789. This suggests that the popular movement depends on revolutionary leaders to make decisions about when to act and what to attack. This is partly true. In July 1789, for example, the Duc d'Orléans, who supported the Third Estate, was an influential leader. Gathering a team of radical journalists, he used his commercial centre of the Palais-Royal as a meeting point for radical speakers. He encouraged men such as Desmoulin to speak to crowds, and to write revolutionary pamphlets and newspapers. These were eagerly read – or at least discussed – by working people.

While leaders could, and did, direct the popular movement, this was not always the case. Historians increasingly have recognised that the revolutionary crowd had **agency** –

**agency** power to make decisions for oneself

that is, the power to make decisions for itself and to act independently of revolutionary leaders. The next section explores the question of whether leaders control the popular movements in revolutions by using Lafayette as a case study.



▲ **Source 9.5** The Duc d'Orléans, commonly known as Philippe, was closely associated with the ruling dynasty of France and actively supported the French Revolution.



▲ **Source 9.6** This engraving shows the journalist Camille Desmoulin at the Palais Royal, urging the crowd to arm itself.

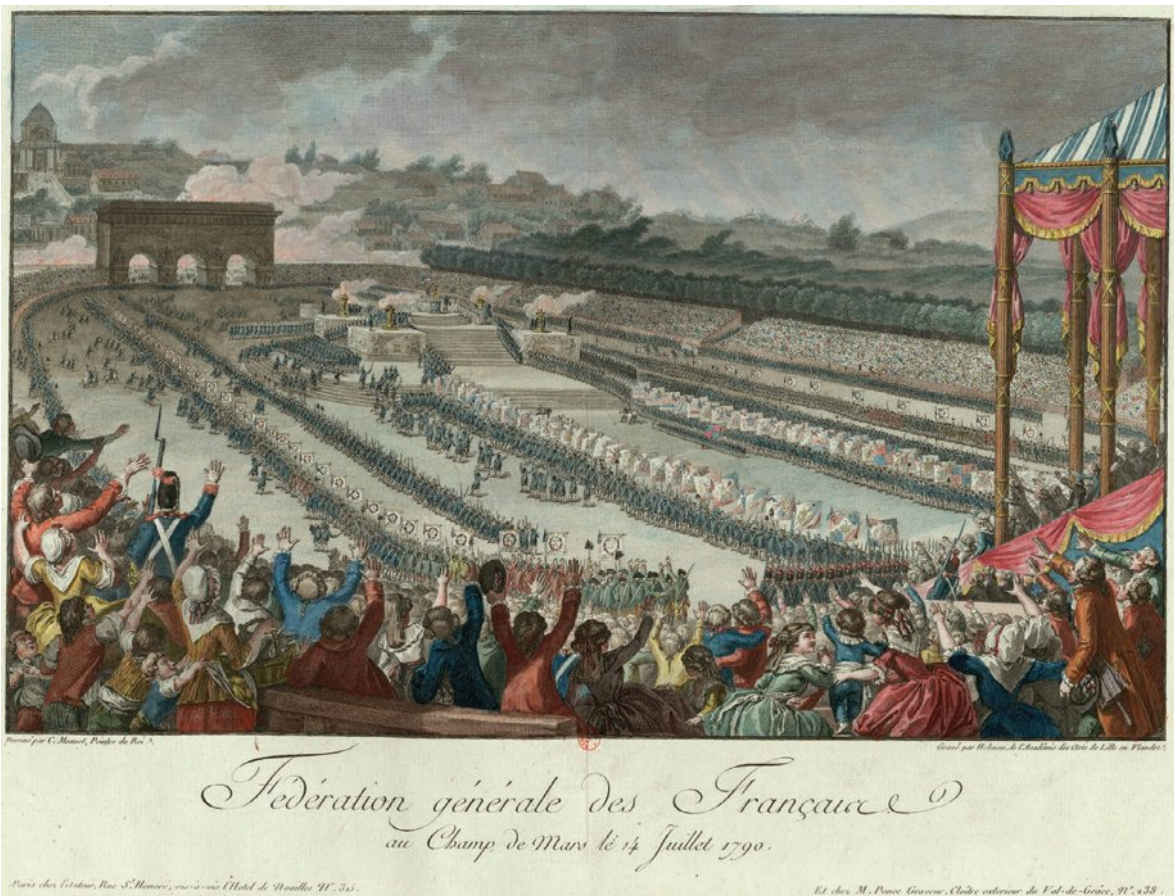
## 9.5 Case study: Can Lafayette control the popular movement?

Lafayette's most important challenge occurred in July 1790. The National Constituent Assembly knew that the popular movement was preparing to celebrate the first anniversary of the capture of the Bastille and feared that these celebrations could become violent. It asked Lafayette for a solution. Knowing that nobody could stop the popular movement, he thought he could channel its energies into safer forms of celebration. Lafayette showed this skill when he organised the crowd into an orderly ceremony for the arrival of the king at the town hall in July 1789. The National Constituent Assembly put him in charge of the anniversary of the capture of the Bastille, which he transformed from a celebration of one event into a complex ceremony and symbolic statement about law, order and constitutional legality. Lafayette named the ceremony the 'Festival of Federation', and used it to dramatised his personal vision of law, order and national unity.

The ceremony worked on several levels. The first, as suggested by the name of the festival, it insisted that the provinces acknowledge their membership of the national entity (Lafayette was probably thinking of the confederation of American states). The second was to bind the members of the National Guard into an oath of loyalty to the body politic. The third was to bind the king into an oath of loyalty to the representative government. Underlying all this was Lafayette's obsession with legality and order; he stated that his aims were to:

*protect in particular private property, the free circulation of food, the collection of taxes and to remain joined to all the French by the indissoluble ties of brotherhood.*

▼ **Source 9.7** This coloured engraving provides an overview of the vast amphitheatre built for the Festival of Federation in 1790.



The Festival of Federation captured the imagination of the people; thousands turned up voluntarily to dig tonnes of earth from the Champ de Mars to create the grand amphitheatre required for the event. Even the most cynical spectators were impressed by this surge of popular support. Historian Mona Ozouf states that spontaneous celebrations had occurred across France, but this was the greatest outpouring of genuine enthusiasm during the revolution. The end result was spectacular. At least 300 000 people attended, and they arrived to find an imposing space that one entered through a massive triumphal arch; the focal point was a central ‘altar of the fatherland’, behind which was a canopy for the dignitaries.

▼ **Source 9.8** A representation of aristocrats and clergy members volunteering to till the fields of the Champ de Mars in preparation for the celebrations. A member of the Third Estate is in the bottom right corner, holding a shovel and singing the revolutionary song ‘Ça Ira’.



The main point of the ceremony was Lafayette’s oath of allegiance to the ‘nation, law and king’. He then accepted the same oath from members of the National Guard from all over France. Predictably, the king, who came next, muffed his part of the ceremony: because it was raining, he insisted on taking his oath under the shelter of the pavilion, which meant that the assembled multitude could not see him. Lafayette diplomatically suggested that he do it again outside, to which Louis XVI snobbishly replied that an oath was not an aria you could do as an encore.

### FOCUS QUESTIONS 9.1

- 1 How do we know that Lafayette could exercise control over the popular movement?
- 2 How do we know that Lafayette did not have complete control over the revolutionary situation?





▲ Source 9.9 Lafayette takes the oath during the Festival of the Federation, as painted in 1791.

## 9.6 How did the revolutionary movement express its ideas?

### Violence as the language of the crowd

The capture of the Bastille showed that a Parisian crowd could use violence as a 'language', and take matters into its own hands. The crowd could turn suddenly on an individual, declaring a person guilty and executing them on the spot by beating, decapitating or hanging them. Such actions shocked middle-class people, who believed that law and order should prevail.



► **Source 9.10** This engraving shows the popular movement using violence to express itself. On 21 October 1789, a crowd attacked a baker who had been selling mouldy bread.

#### KEY HISTORIAN

#### Albert Soboul (1914–1982)

In 1975, historian Albert Soboul wrote the following about the French revolutionary crowd in 1789:

*The insurrection of the popular classes had ensured the victory of the bourgeoisie. Thanks to the [revolutionary days] of July and October the attempted counter-revolution had been shattered. The National Assembly, having emerged triumphant from its struggle with the monarchy only with the help of the Parisians, now feared that it might find itself at the mercy of the people and was in future every bit as distrustful of the forces of democracy as it was of absolutism. [Because] it was afraid to call on the popular classes to participate in political life and public administration, it was reluctant to draw from the solemn statement of the Declaration of Rights the conclusions which followed so naturally from them.*

**Source 9.11** *The French Revolution, 1787–1799*, 1975, pp. 157–8

- 1 According to Soboul, what was the main achievement of the revolutionary crowd during 1789?
- 2 Why does Soboul feel that the bourgeois deputies feared the popular movement and hesitated to give working people a greater place in political life?
- 3 From what you know of the revolution, is it accurate to say that it was a middle-class revolution, making only reluctant use of the popular movement when it was threatened by counter-revolution?

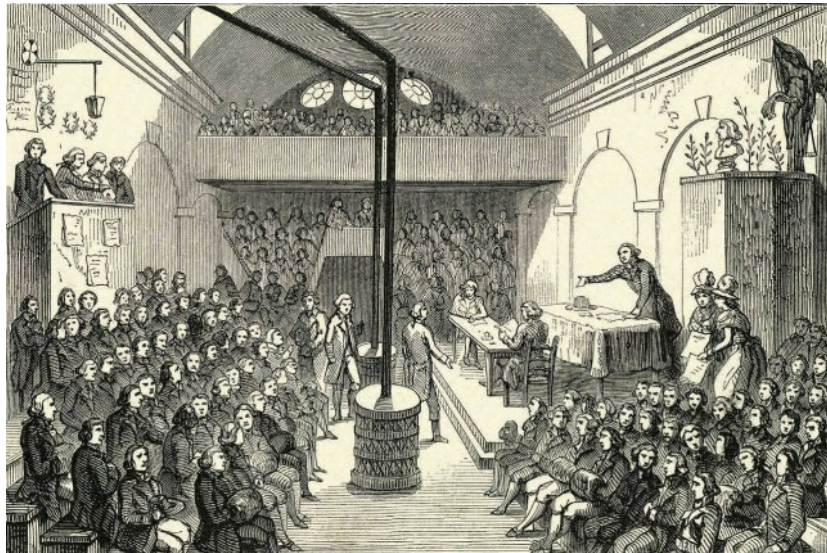
## What was the role of the political club?

Many working people in Paris were literate enough to read political pamphlets and nearly all of them had the verbal literacy to discuss political ideas. What they did not have at first was a venue where they could express their opinions and debate revolutionary issues.

After 1789, the revolutionary movement worked mainly through the political clubs. These were not new; a Club of the Arts had been founded at the Palais-Royal in 1782. Revolutionary clubs multiplied after February 1790, when ordinary citizens became involved in national politics on a popular level. Two of the most famous clubs, the **Jacobin Club** and the **Cordeliers Club**, contained so many influential figures that they resembled political parties. The Cordeliers Club first encouraged working people to join in the discussion of national affairs. It was not long before a club member – a teacher by the name of Dansard – also invited women to participate in his club and this became a common practice.

**Jacobin Club** the most famous and influential political club in the revolution, which developed into an extensive, nationwide network; led by Maximilien de Robespierre, at its height it controlled the government and directed the Terror of 1793–94

**Cordeliers Club** first known as Claude Dansard's Fraternal Society, the Cordeliers Club was the first society to admit women to political debates and give them equal voting rights



▲ Source 9.12 This engraving is a representation of the interior of a political club.



▲ Source 9.13 Left: The emblem of the Jacobin Club, with the Club's motto, 'Live free or die'. Right: The membership card of the Cordeliers Club. This particular card was for Augustin Robespierre, brother of Maximilien.



## How did the popular movement express its new sense of identity?

### Phrygian bonnet

copied from the red hat worn by the slaves of ancient Rome once they had been freed

While revolutions overthrow old political systems and create new ones, they also cause changes in the ways people see themselves. We could call this a revolution in psychology

because people gain a new sense of identity, self-awareness and pride. For the working people of Paris, this involved the reversal of the old culture of deference. Instead of feeling inferior to the wealthy and well-educated, working people took pride in their way of life.

They were now proud to wear plain trousers and to grow bushy hairstyles. They also developed an egalitarian culture, which meant celebrating their common way of life and, later, expressing hatred for the rich. Historians know that working people created their own symbols: the popular movement enforced the wearing of the revolutionary cockade and adopted the fashion of wearing the red **Phrygian bonnet**.



▲ Source 9.14 The red Phrygian bonnet became a symbol and code for the revolutionary principle of liberty.

### FOCUS QUESTIONS 9.2

- 1 What role did the revolutionary clubs play in making the popular movement think in political terms?
- 2 In what ways can it be said that the French Revolution caused a major psychological change among French working people?

► Source 9.15 Here, an artisan (*left*) and a Parisian laundry woman (*right*) proclaim proudly – and in bad grammar – ‘I are of the Third Estate’, demonstrating a new sense of identity and self-confidence.



### THE STORY SO FAR

In the French Revolution, the role of the crowd in popular movements in France was both old and new. Working people had a long tradition of crowd action, protest and the use of violence. The various crises of the French Revolution revealed how strong the crowd was. Working people proved that they could think beyond immediate material grievances and contemplate national political issues. By late 1789, the popular movement demonstrated that it did have agency and could take action independently of middle-class political leaders.

Use the QR code or visit the Interactive Textbook and watch the video summarising the chapter.



## Develop your historical-thinking skills

### Using historical terms meaningfully

Write an extended paragraph explaining the way in which popular movements in cities and in the countryside helped consolidate the early stages of the revolution in 1789. Use the following terms and phrases to show you understand their meaning and context:

- the women's march to Versailles
- material grievances
- individual attacks on officials
- Jacobin Club
- Cordeliers Club
- cultural expressions of self-identity.

### Analysing cause and consequence

- 1 Using four or five main points, explain how the revolution was consolidated between July and October 1789.
- 2 Using three or four main points, explain why the revolutionary crowd, although dangerous, was absolutely necessary to the final victory of the revolution in 1789.

### Constructing historical arguments

- 1 'The capture of the Bastille (14 July 1789) was only the first step in the revolution. The consolidation of the revolution was really achieved in the remaining months of 1789.' Discuss this statement.
- 2 'While revolutionary leaders needed the support of the popular movement, and at times guided its actions, the popular movement could take political action of its own.' To what extent is this true of the French Revolution between 1789 and 1791?

### Analysing historical interpretations

#### Donald Sutherland

Historian Donald Sutherland argues that the October Days totally changed the pattern of power in France:

*[Nothing] could disguise the fact that political authority had shifted decisively. The October Days represented the first and hardly the last occasion when direct Parisian intervention decisively affected national politics. The first victim was of course the king, who was intimidated into accepting the constitutional decrees and into moving [to Paris]. The [National] Constituent Assembly too was in a sense a victim ... the deputies had their actions dictated to them by the Parisian crowd.*

Source 9.16 D.M.G. Sutherland, *France: 1789–1815*, 1985, p. 85

- 1 Why, according to Sutherland, did the crowd action of October 1789 cause a complete change in power relationships in the revolution?
- 2 In what sense was Louis XVI a victim of the popular movement?
- 3 Why might the deputies of the National Constituent Assembly need the revolutionary crowd but also fear it?



# 10

## CREATING A NEW SOCIETY, 1789–91

*Most of the reforms carried out by the Constituent Assembly ... were the product of the revolutionary process itself.*

– WILLIAM DOYLE, 1989

## Overview



While the patriots of 1789 drew on a broad range of ideas to define the principles of the new society, these would have little value for people unless they were translated into law and into reality. The publication of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, followed later by the Constitution of 1791, completed the first process of turning principles into law. The great campaign to reorganise all the administrative structures of France, which swept away the jumble of institutions from the old regime, accomplished the second aim of creating the administrative, religious and legal structures of the new society.

## Key issues

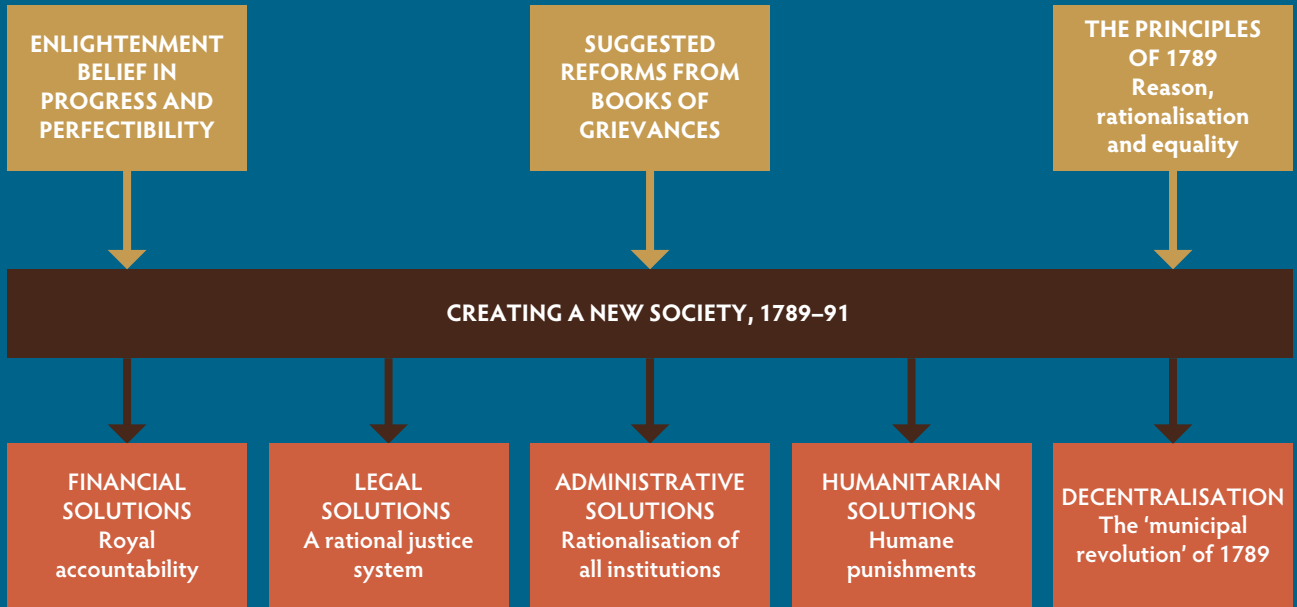
- Why do historians debate the creation of a new society in France?
- What were the key principles of reform?
- How was the administration of France rationalised?
- Did the reforms create a fair and accessible judicial system?
- Did the revolution improve life for most people?

## Digital resources for this chapter

In the *Interactive Textbook*:

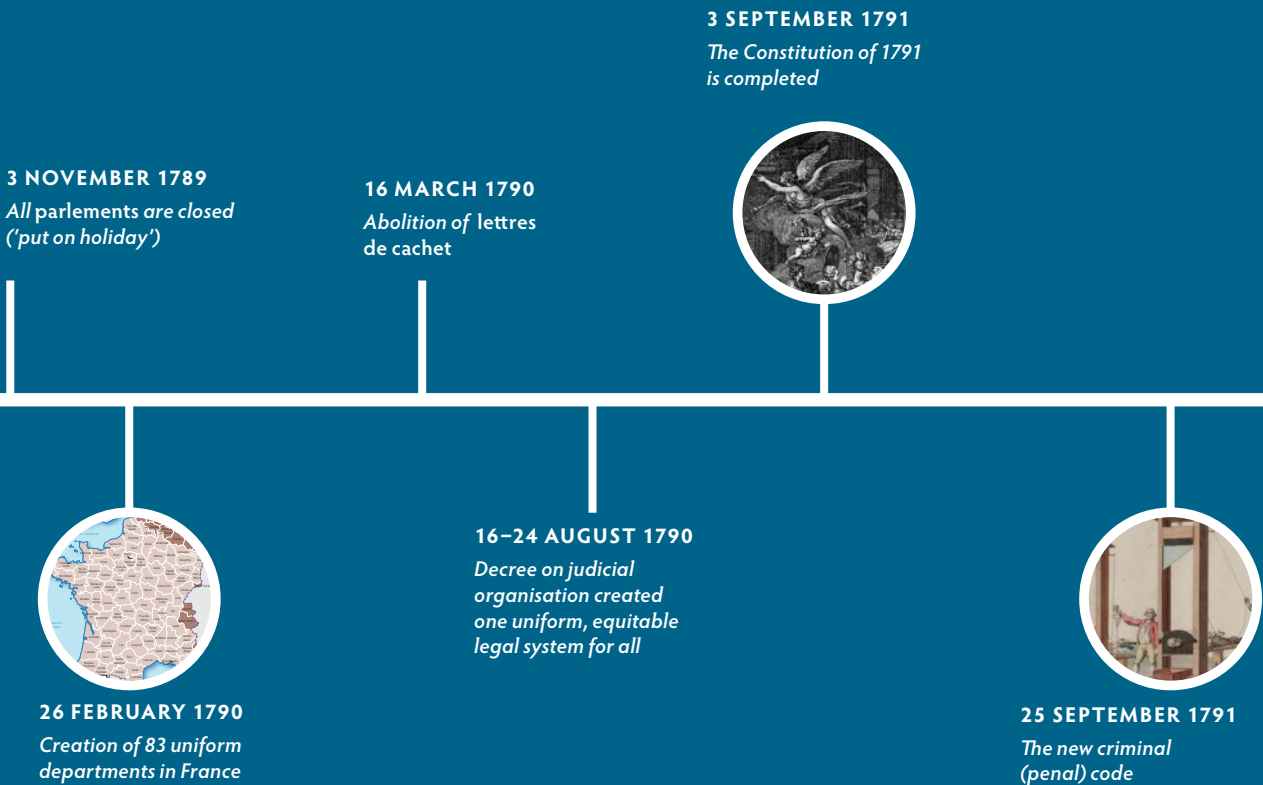
-  video and audio sources and questions
-  digital activities.

# Flow of chapter



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# Chapter timeline





## 10.1 The creation of a new society in France

The revolution's success in creating a new society is one of the most bitterly contested questions among historians. For the generation of historians influenced by the works of Karl Marx, for example, the French Revolution was an **epochal** event that changed a political regime and took France from feudalism into the more advanced stage of capitalism. Seen amid such a grandiose scheme, the French Revolution seemed unquestionable.

**epochal** an event significant in terms of history

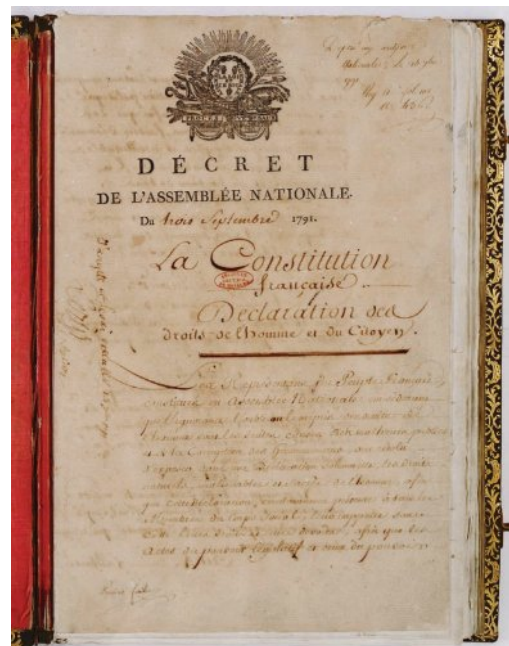


▲ **Source 10.1** This engraving imagines the three estates as blacksmiths, who have to work together to 'hammer out' France's new constitution on an anvil.

By contrast, other historians believe that the French Revolution was partly a failure. For example, in his authoritative summation of the revolution, William Doyle acknowledged that it created significant changes, but questioned whether they were really sufficient to justify the amount of struggle, violence and loss of life it also caused. He concluded:

*Was, then, the revolution worth it in material terms? For most ordinary French subjects turned by it into citizens, it cannot have been.*

Doyle's negative conclusion is questionable, but it provides a useful warning: we cannot *assume* that a revolution automatically makes a society better, but must *prove* that it actually did.



► **Source 10.2** France's new constitution

## 10.2 The key principles of reform: Reason and equality

The first great project to reorganise France was completed between 1789 and 1791, and created a new society by reforming, rationalising and improving the administrative structures of national life. The revolutionaries believed, correctly, that if they applied the principles of reason and equality to the structures of everyday life – from government through to justice – then the nation's life must be improved. This first program to create a new society is frequently forgotten or underestimated, especially by those who argue that the revolution did not do much to improve the lives of the people.

The first great campaign of reform began almost immediately in 1789, proceeded quickly and was brought to a successful conclusion in 1790–91; it thus belongs to the first, moderate stage of the revolution. The political project to create a viable constitutional monarchy was paralleled by a massive administrative project to clear the chaotic organisation of the old regime, and to create a more rational and equitable system of administration and justice. By October 1789, the newly formed National Assembly was consolidated in its legal existence and its strategic position, and could start its true task of reforming France.



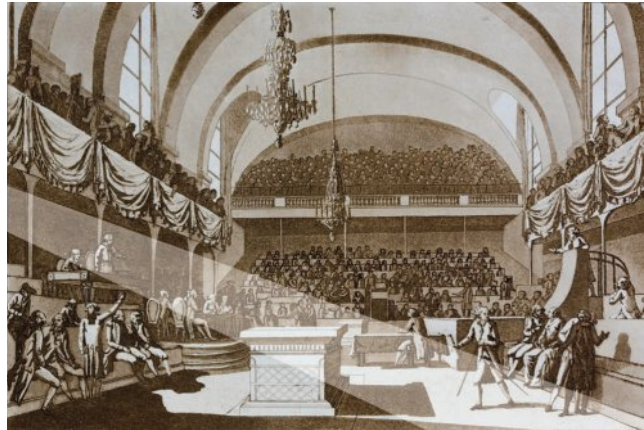
▲ **Source 10.3** This cartoon depicts equality as 'The national levelling', which keeps everyone at the same height.

For the generation of 1789, the revolution occurred quickly, albeit with some violence and loss of life; France appeared to have achieved a liberal revolution like that of the American colonies. As early as October 1789, and throughout 1790, people concluded that the revolution was over. They could not know that the revolution would become a series of radical upheavals, destabilising the nation for years. There were a few worrying signs, such as nobles leaving the country, but otherwise the revolution seemed to be finished.

We are therefore currently studying the first 'project' for revolution – that is, what the revolutionaries intended in 1789, long before the grim realities of the Terror occurred.

## Translating the principles of 1789 into practice

By late 1789, the National Assembly had committed itself to fundamental principles, including equality before the law, the abolition of privilege and the recognition of merit. It reversed the idea of the origins of power. Previously, power came from above – from God, via the king; now it came from below, from the entity known as ‘the nation’. The National Assembly had also rejected the corporate society, in which groups enjoyed privileges; basic human rights were seen as universal and applying equally to everybody.



▲ **Source 10.4** The engraving on the left shows how much faith people put in the National Assembly as a body that would break the privileges and power of the aristocrats, who are shown here as upper clergy (*right*), nobles (*left*) and a member of *parlement* (*centre*). The figure in the sky is symbolic: it holds a copy of Rousseau’s *Social Contract*, and uses a mirror to direct a beam of light at the door of the National Assembly. The engraving on the right shows the inside of the building used for the National Assembly – a riding school.

There are two ways of seeing this comprehensive program of national reform, accomplished between 1789 and 1791. First, it can be viewed as a response to the problems listed in the Books of Grievances. From these grievances, the government took three main ideas. It accepted that the financial problem – the national debt – could be solved by a political solution: that of making the king accountable to a parliament. This prompted the progression from absolute monarchy, in which the king ruled as he wished, to **constitutional monarchy**, in which the king ruled in conjunction with a representative assembly.

**constitutional monarchy**  
a political system in which the monarch rules in conjunction with a representative assembly



▲ **Source 10.5** This painting by Lesueur shows the new political personnel who emerge when democratic institutions are created.



The government also accepted that the financial problem would be solved by a complete fiscal reform, making all citizens responsible for paying tax. Finally, the government accepted that the new citizens of the nation should have civic and legal equality, and some guarantees of individual liberties.

The other way of seeing this program of national reforms is that the revolutionaries went far beyond the suggestions contained in the Books of Grievances and implemented reforms that nobody had even dared to dream of in 1788. In other words, the revolution had created the revolutionaries, and these new revolutionaries invented a total program of national reform.

The Books of Grievances had not suggested an administrative reorganisation of the entire nation; the revolutionaries conceived of the idea of abolishing the old provinces and creating in their place a more rational system of departments. The grievances had not contained many demands to abolish noble and all other titles. Likewise, there were only grumbles about feudal dues and special privileges, but nobody had suggested dismantling the entire feudal system. The grievances had not contained an overall plan for the Catholic Church's property; there were certainly grumbles about the polarisation of wealth in the Church, but nobody had suggested that the state confiscate all Church possessions. The National Assembly also destroyed institutions that nobody had dared question, such as the system of venality of office and the *parlements*.



▲ **Source 10.6** This engraving shows the process by which nobles (*right*) surrendered their honorific titles, which were banned in the new society. Even the corporation of coal porters (*left*) surrendered an emblem the king had granted them.

**FOCUS QUESTIONS 10.1**

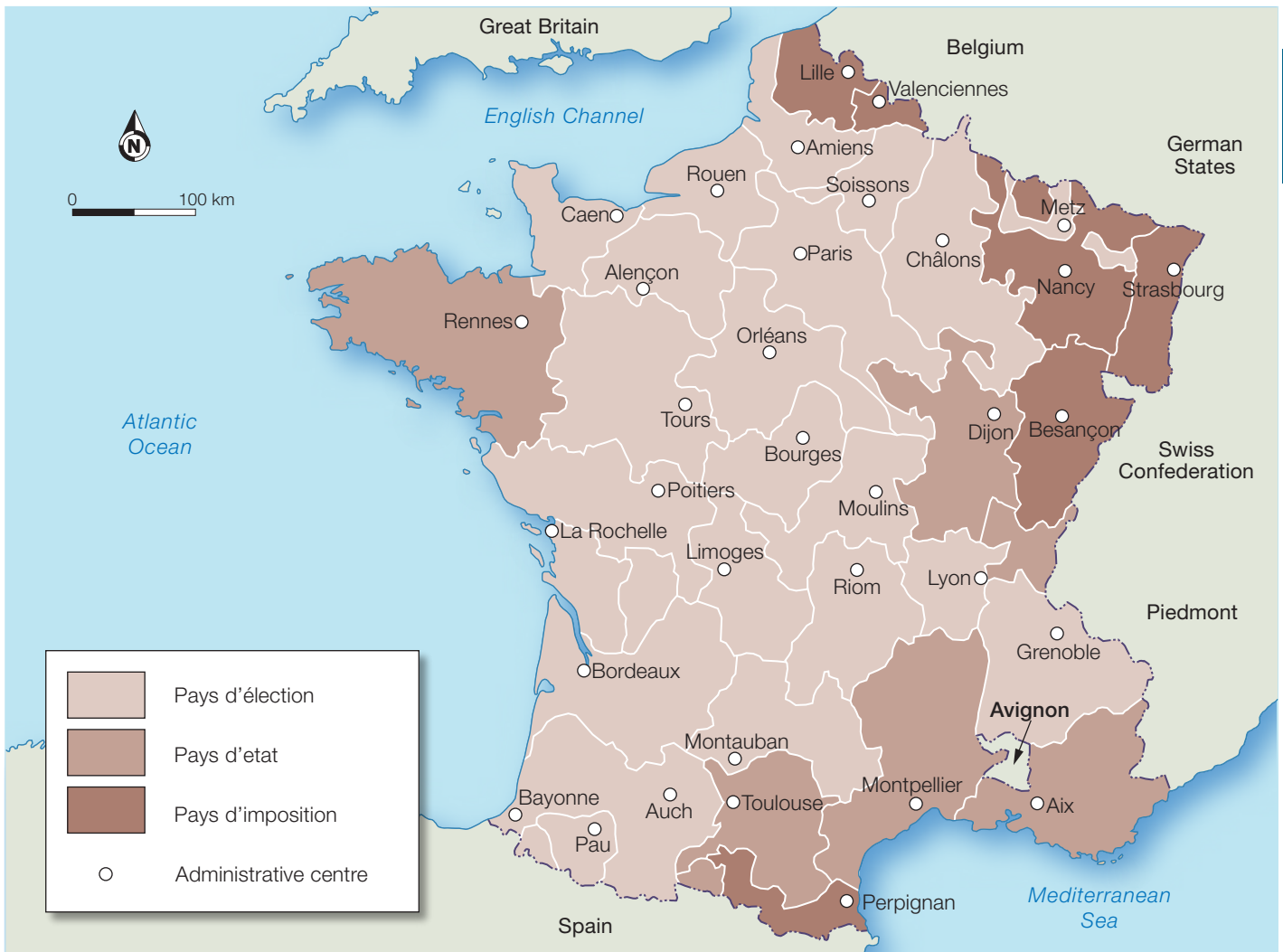
- 1 To what extent did the revolutionaries of 1789 base their reform of France on the problems that had been outlined in the Books of Grievances?
- 2 In what ways did the revolutionaries of 1789 go far beyond the suggestions that had been made in the Books of Grievances?

## 10.3 The rationalisation of administration

Before the revolution, France was a confused jumble of overlapping institutional networks. Faced with this tangle of inherited institutions, the reformers of 1789 realised that they had to achieve a **rationalisation** – a practical application of what the *philosophes* had called reason – to reduce overlapping and unnecessary institutions. This can be seen as the first principle of the reform.

**rationalisation**  
practical application of what the *philosophes* had called reason

Previously, France had been divided unequally into traditional regions. The National Assembly now re-divided France into 83 more equal departments. Each department was then subdivided into districts and these, in turn, into communes. This created a clear, rational, efficient administrative grid, within which all national matters would be handled.



▲ **Source 10.7** The chaotic jumble of overlapping authorities in France under the old regime



▲ Source 10.8 The rational, new administrative framework, which allowed improvements in the organisation of government, justice and the law

**decentralisation** counterbalancing the powerful central government with a network of local governments in the provinces

Another principle of the reform was **decentralisation**. Previously, political power had been concentrated in the royal government at Versailles. The reformers hoped that if the powerful central government in Paris were counterbalanced with a network of local government in the provinces, then it would be much more difficult for the king and the conservative nobles to regain power by securing control of the centre.

## 10.4 The creation of a fair and accessible judicial system

The last great principle of reform was **uniformity**, or the idea that any institution should work much the same way, no matter where it was in France. One of the best examples of the need for uniformity was France's legal system. Under the old regime, the confusion was appalling. There had been two distinct systems of law, one in the north of France and one in the south. In addition, there had been a tangle of numerous different types of courts; apart from the *parlements*, there were also seigneurial courts, administered by the nobles, and **ecclesiastical** courts, administered by the Catholic Church.

**uniformity** the quality or fact of being the same

**ecclesiastical** involving the Christian church

**canton** a division of an area of France

For these reformers – many of them lawyers and government officials – it was not acceptable to have one sort of justice administered by the monarch, another by the nobles and yet another by the clergy. Instead, there would be one system of justice, administered equally to all by trained lawyers. This made justice more accessible, fair and humane. For the first time, every French citizen could expect to receive the same treatment as anyone else, no matter what their social standing might be.

The judicial system was established in the new administrative structure of departments, districts and **cantons**. At the head of the system stood a court of appeal, which would be made up of judges democratically elected by the departmental assemblies. The buying of high office (venality) was banned, and applicants had to have practised as lawyers for at least five years. Each department had a criminal court. Trials were heard in public and judged by a jury of 12 citizens chosen by ballot, along the same lines as the English system. Finally, there was a justice of the peace appointed in each canton, to provide some legal guidance at the local level – mainly in regards to reconciliation and arbitration, and hearing minor cases.

The administration of the law was improved. Previously, a person could be sent to prison and left there indefinitely, simply by the word of a royal instruction. The *lettres de cachet* were abolished and the process of arresting a person was strictly formalised. Anybody arrested must appear before the court within 24 hours or be released.

► **Source 10.9** Joseph Lecocq, a former judge in the *parlement*, puts away his red robes and his coat of arms (visible in background, being covered over) and proudly puts on the costume of a lawyer in the new, revolutionary system of justice. By putting on his *tricolore* sash, he is accepting that the law will apply equally to every citizen in France, no matter who they are.



## Humane principles of punishment

The reformers also re-examined punishment. Inspired by Enlightenment commentary upon the barbarity of inhuman punishments, they reduced the number of crimes for which people were executed and abolished cruel punishments such as breaking on the wheel, torture and mutilation. They abolished the differential system of execution, whereby nobles were beheaded while commoners suffered hanging. They adapted the machine suggested by enlightened people such as Dr Louis and Dr Guillotin to ensure that if a citizen were executed, they would die swiftly and almost painlessly.



▲ **Source 10.10** Depiction of the guillotine in use. The guillotine was considered a more humane way to execute a person than other methods such as the breaking wheel.



◀ **Source 10.11** Dr Joseph-Ignace Guillotin created a device to carry out the death penalty in a way that caused less pain.



## 10.5 Did the revolution improve life for most people?

The revolution's reform of France's administrative structures was an enormous achievement; virtually all the official structures that governed everyday existence were made more rational, more efficient and more accountable – and hence they became more accessible and fair. The revolution also established the organisational structures that modern France still uses, with some later consolidation by Napoleon Bonaparte.



▲ Source 10.12 The court of appeal in a Paris courthouse today

The breadth and depth of this first campaign of reform is worth remembering. By resolving the contradictions and the inequities of the old regime, everyday life became immeasurably better for most people in France. Therefore, it is difficult to agree with Doyle's sweeping statement that, for most ordinary people, the revolution cannot have been worth it in material terms. In purely structural and administrative terms, the French Revolution began with a magnificent success, one that brought substantial benefits to all people.

### The revolution failed to help the poor

Despite the French Revolution providing substantial benefits, not all of the attempts to reorganise France were successful. In purely theoretical terms, the government introduced the important innovation of recognising the principle of systemic social welfare; that is, that people who were poor had a right to assistance and that the government had a duty to provide it. The government were prepared to fulfil the role previously carried out by the Catholic Church and by private agencies, and understood the concept of social services as a system available to all citizens.

#### FOCUS QUESTIONS 10.2

- 1 What were the key principles that guided the reorganisation of France in 1789?
- 2 In what ways might the actual reforms have improved life for most French people?



When they examined the problem in practice, they discovered that the population of 28 million included, at the very least, two million who survived by begging, which did not include the number of people who joined the poor in bad times. The revolutionary government was in a hopeless position – it had committed itself to the principle of social welfare and created a committee to investigate poverty, but it did not have sufficient funds to implement assistance on such a vast scale.

### THE STORY SO FAR

While all revolutions tend to state their ideals, the French Revolution is remarkable for the seriousness with which it committed itself to a legal statement of its fundamental ideas. Once the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen was completed in August 1789, it was intended to be a provisional statement until the constitution itself was finished. When that happened, the declaration would become an introduction to the constitution and could be changed. However, the declaration rapidly took on an almost religious importance, and nobody later dared to suggest any changes to it, except for a few minor amendments.

Use the QR code or visit the Interactive Textbook and watch the video summarising the chapter.



## Develop your historical-thinking skills

### Establishing historical significance

Briefly describe three main changes made in the reorganisation of France and explain the significance of one of them.

### Using historical terms meaningfully

Write an extended paragraph explaining the extent to which the National Constituent Assembly's massive raft of reforms virtually wiped out all the political, social, economic and legal aspects of the old regime in France to create a fairer, more rational and more equal society. Use the following terms and phrases to show you understand their meaning and context:

- equality before the law
- accountability
- power from the nation
- constitutional monarchy
- rationalisation
- decentralisation
- abolition of courts for privileged orders
- departments
- districts
- cantons
- humane punishments.

## Constructing historical arguments

‘When we see the new society that had been created in France by 1791, the changes from the old regime are far more powerful than the continuities.’ To what extent do you agree with this statement?

## Analysing historian’s interpretations

### William Doyle (1942–)

In 1989, historian William Doyle admitted the importance of the reorganisation of France:

*In the sense that they [gave] France a constitutional monarchy, decentralised and representative institutions, civil and fiscal equality, and guarantees for individual liberty, [the revolutionaries] were broadly true to the instructions of the [Books of Grievances]. [But these] contained no mandate for the abolition of the provinces, municipalities, nobility or titles. [Almost] none called for a declaration of rights, and none at all for a National Guard or paper money. Most of the reforms ... were the product of the revolutionary process itself ... And yet, once made, the far-reaching changes of the revolution’s first year were well received. Their implementation may have been chaotic and disorganised, but they were carried through with remarkable goodwill and even enthusiasm considering the multitude of vested interests they threatened or damaged.*

**Source 10.13** ‘The Revolution in Perspective’, in *The Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 1989, pp. 134–5

- 1 According to Doyle, which revolutionary reforms can be seen as responses to suggestions made in the Books of Grievances?
- 2 Which revolutionary changes were completely new in 1789?
- 3 Why does Doyle assume that these radical reforms must have met with approval from the majority of the French people?



▲ Source 10.14 William Doyle



# 1 1 SOURCES OF DISUNITY IN THE REVOLUTION, 1789–91

*The initiative of Louis XVI himself precipitated the conflict that brought his downfall.*

– GEORGES LEFEBVRE, 1939

## Overview

The period 1790–91 is significant because this is the point at which the revolution lost the broad support and agreement it enjoyed during the first two years. More than any other year, 1791 highlighted the deep divisions in the revolution. Examination of this year enables us to identify the sources of tensions and divisions, and to explore why the revolutionary project began to fragment.

By 14 July 1790, the revolution seemed to be making good progress. In this hopeful atmosphere, the revolutionaries proceeded to a reform that most people agreed was necessary: ecclesiastical reform. However, this unexpectedly proved to be the first serious obstacle to the revolution's progress.



The ecclesiastical reform was not a destructive attack by a revolutionary government upon the Catholic Church. The revolution did not wish to destroy the Church, and the Church was not opposed to the revolution. Nobody expected that the administrative reform of the nation would not include the Church, which was now part of the state. It was a relic of the old regime's corporate society and often provided an extreme example of inequitable privilege. The Church did not pay its fair share of taxation and its hierarchy favoured birth over merit. There was therefore little disagreement that Church reform was necessary.

## Key issues

- What was the administrative reorganisation of the Catholic Church?
- What were the reforms created by the Civil Constitution of the Clergy from August 1789 to July 1790?
- To what extent did the clergy oppose the reforms from October to November 1790?
- How was France's constitution drafted from 1789 to 1791?
- Why did the revolution divide against itself from 1790 to 1791?

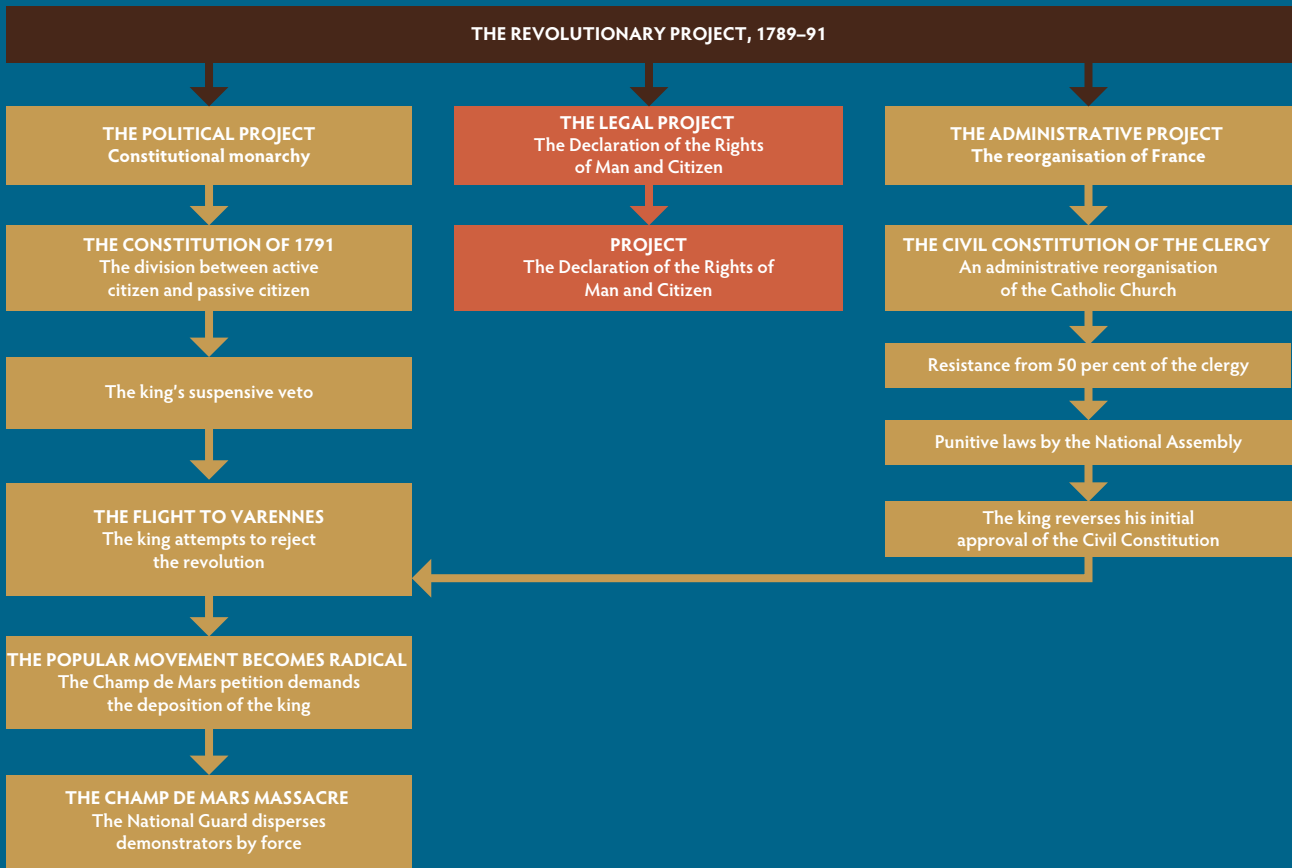
## Digital resources for this chapter

In the *Interactive Textbook*:

-  video and audio sources and questions
-  digital activities.

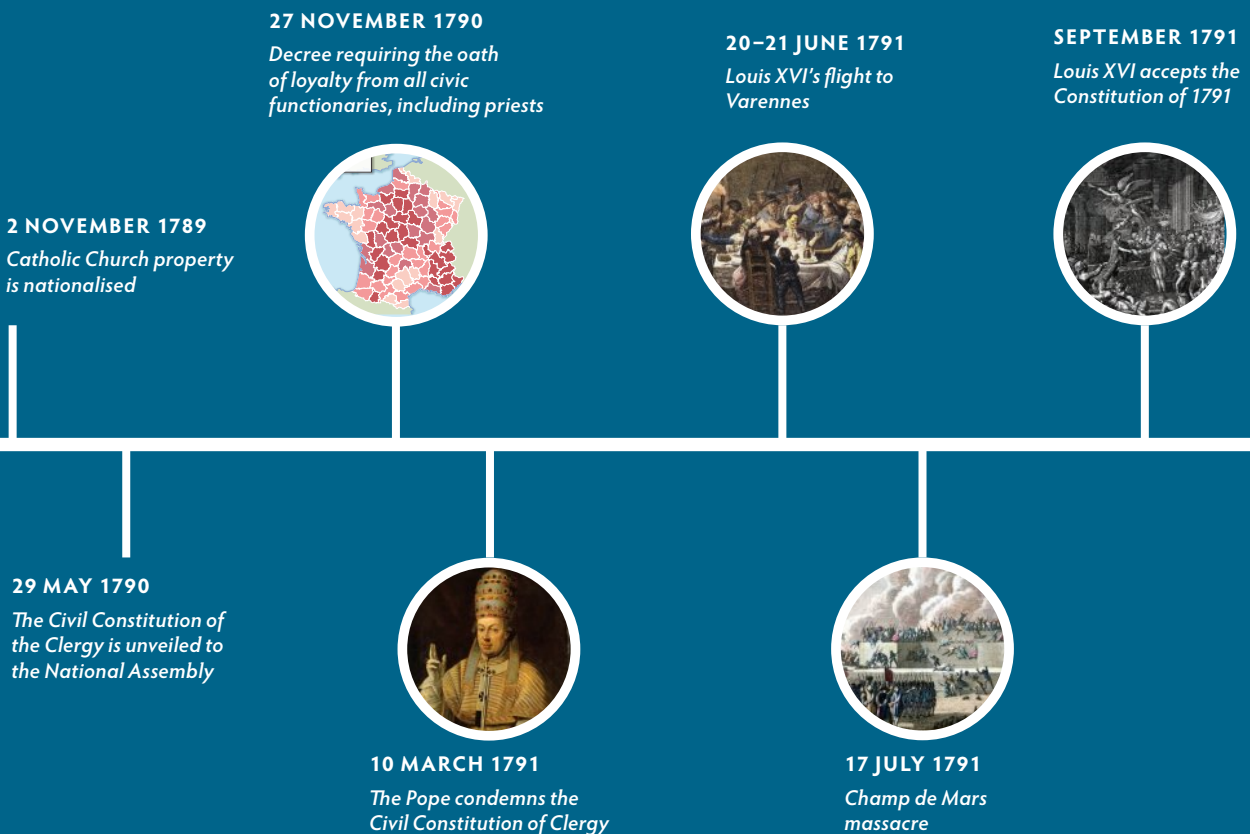
◀ **Source 11.0** Engraving of the arrest of King Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette at Varennes

# Flow of chapter



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# Chapter timeline

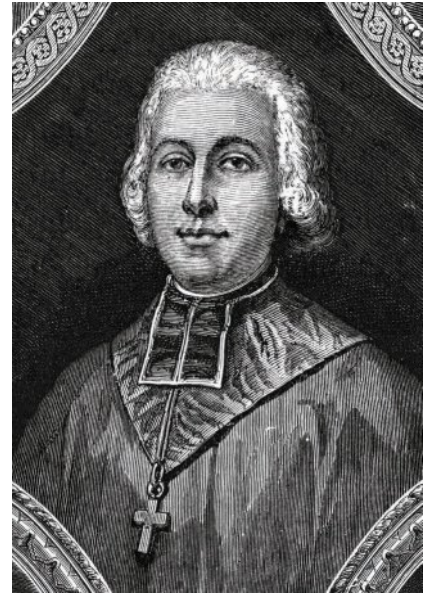


## 11.1 The administrative reorganisation of the Catholic Church

The French Revolution did not aim to destroy the Catholic Church and the Church was not opposed to the revolution. Many clergy admitted in their Books of Grievances that the Church needed reform. In June 1789, they left their order and crossed the floor of the Estates-General to vote with the Third Estate, transforming the Third Estate into the National Assembly. Members of the nobility and the Third Estate also criticised the Church in their Books of Grievances. Many agreed that the Church must lose its privileges, but few predicted how much it would lose. However necessary the reforms, the changes were devastating to the Church. Why did the reform of the Church create such bitter division in France?

The first reforms changed the Church's financial and organisational structure. Church privileges were abolished without compensation and, through the August Decrees, the Church lost both feudal dues from its lands and the tithe paid by peasants. The Church also no longer decided how much tax it would pay and plural appointments were abolished. Yet, most clergy accepted these sweeping reforms because they were better off as civil servants. Later reforms affected the prestige and spiritual authority of the Church because the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen refused to make Catholicism the sole state religion; it granted freedom of religious belief to Protestants and Jews.

By October 1789, it was clear that the Church would lose more than its monopoly on belief. Bishop Talleyrand suggested that the nation solve its financial problems by confiscating and selling the Church's land. On 2 November 1789, the National Assembly duly nationalised Church property. Still, most clergy accepted the radical change to the Church's status; they were still paid better as civil servants and they felt no major conflict of conscience.



▲ Source 11.1 Bishop Talleyrand proposed that Church land could be used to fix France's financial problems because the land really belonged to the nation.



▲ Source 11.2 This engraving symbolically suggests that the 'fat' upper clergy needed to be put through a machine called 'The Patriotic Fat-Remover'

## 11.2 The Civil Constitution of the Clergy

The Civil Constitution of the Clergy was a law passed by the National Assembly on 12 July 1790 that completely reorganised the Catholic Church. The French bishops advised the king to accept and proclaim this constitution, which he did on 24 August 1790. The committee that drafted the document assumed that there was a clear division between the administration of the Church, which is a secular matter, and the theology of the Church, which is a spiritual one. The document was a *civil* constitution because it dealt solely with Church's organisation. While the committee respected the Pope's spiritual authority, it believed that the administration of the Church in France was its business.

The first upset occurred when, in May 1790, the French bishops suggested that, if Church reforms were necessary, the National Assembly should consult with a national Church Council. The National Assembly refused to consult with a remnant of the old, privileged Church; that is, the National Assembly believed it represented the nation, so it had the right to make reforms unilaterally without consultation.

### Positive aspects of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy

When the committee unveiled its constitution to the National Assembly in May 1790, it was clear that it had responded intelligently with constructive solutions. The state guaranteed generous salaries for all clergy and all clergy had to live near their appointment. The crazy patchwork of the Church's organisation was streamlined, creating 83 bishops for the 83 departments and reorganising thousands of parishes. The only real administrative disadvantage was that some upper clergy lost their positions.

However, two new measures of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy were alarming. The appointment of clergy was democratised; everybody from bishop to priest was elected by meetings of citizens. The second problem was the government's aggressive attitude to the spiritual head of the Church. Although it acknowledged the role of the Pope, it forbade French citizens any contact with foreign Church representatives, and deprived the Pope of the power to appoint archbishops and bishops.

#### FOCUS QUESTIONS 11.1

- 1 Why did the National Assembly feel that it was obliged to reform the Catholic Church in France?
- 2 What were some of the positive aspects of its reorganisation of the Church?

## 11.3 The attitude of the papacy

Before the outbreak of the French Revolution, the papacy's relationship with France had been relatively calm, especially because the Pope depended on continued French support for the papal enclave – the papal enclave was a special territory in France owned by the Vatican in Avignon in the south of France.

The events of 1789 did not necessarily alarm Pope Pius VI, as the new measures were confined to the secular domain of political structures. However, he probably would not have predicted that the reform of political structures must, inevitably, lead to a reform of the French Catholic Church (known as the 'Gallican Church').

The Gallican Church was one of the pillars of the old regime. It was a religious institution but, as a supporter for the monarchy, it was also a political one. Historian C. Garret contends:

*the revolutionaries' religious reforms and [the Pope's] own intransigence [stubbornness] were to produce the most serious crisis for the papacy since the fifteenth century.*

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Photocopying is restricted under law and this material must not be transferred to another party.



▲ Source 11.3 Pope Pius VI was head of the Roman Catholic Church from 15 February 1775 to 29 August 1799.



Pope Pius VI was temperamentally cautious in matters of international diplomacy. He made no statement on the nationalisation of Church land in November 1789 or the creation of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy in July 1790, although both would have disturbed him. In particular, there was a danger that such reforms might serve as a precedent for similar changes in other countries, some of which had already attempted reforms of this nature. The Pope's tactic was to wait and see whether France's own body of bishops, or the king, might be able to stop the reforms.

The situation was complicated by some reforms (such as the abolition of **pluralism** and **absenteeism**) had been recommended by the clergy themselves in their book of grievances; others, like the nationalisation of Church land, had been recommended by clergy in the National Assembly, such as Talleyrand and Grégoire. Moreover, most of the reforms had been greeted with enthusiasm, because they benefited the clergy. Historian William Doyle writes:

*there was little in the organization effected under the Civil Constitution to alarm the majority of the priests.*

For Pope Pius VI, the real problem was the matter of authority. The National Assembly had distinguished between spiritual authority, which unquestionably belonged to the Pope as head of the Catholic Church, and administrative authority, which now belonged to the sovereign parliament. Most seriously, the Pope was stripped of the power to confirm the appointment of bishops and archbishops; these were now to be elected by the people.

Pope Pius VI delayed but finally wrote to Louis XVI to urge him to reject the Civil Constitution of the Clergy on 5 July 1790. However, he was too late; the French bishops had already advised the king that he must sanction the reforms and the king had done so. When the document was proclaimed on 24 August 1790, the Pope was still unsuccessfully seeking strategies to prevent it. Inside France, discussion of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy suddenly assumed a new dimension; your opinion on the reforms became a measure of your loyalty to the new revolutionary order. The conservative right-wing press erupted into scathing criticism of the reforms. The more radical members of the Revolution Club (soon to be known as the Jacobin Club) angrily defended the changes.

On 30 October 1790, 30 bishops in the National Assembly voted against the Civil Constitution of the Clergy and were branded 'unpatriotic'. They argued, quite reasonably, that such significant changes must be made in consultation with the Pope or a Church assembly. During October, November and December 1790, the French Catholic Church divided over these reforms.

The result was chaos. In some departments, people elected their bishops, but the archbishop would not confirm them. Elsewhere, bishops thundered criticism of the reforms and suffered the indignity of being sacked by the local government. In the town of Nantes, all 104 priests refused the reforms and the department stopped their salaries. By the beginning of 1791, the National Assembly was flooded with reports of conflict, confusion and chaos in churches across France.

Pope Pius VI made no comment for eight months. While his caution in the matter is understandable, it was also disastrous. Historian C. Garrett writes:

*the eight months delay before the pope spoke out ... placed the French clergy in a tragic dilemma, which many of them saw as forcing them to choose between their country and the Church.*

**pluralism** the practice by which a bishop could hold more than one appointment in different parts of France

**absenteeism** the problem of bishops neglecting their appointments



▲ Source 11.4 A member of the clergy cries about the reorganising of Gallican Church departments.



Pope Pius VI finally spoke publicly against the reforms in 1791 in two documents – first in March, then in April. He completely rejected the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. He also went further and condemned the basic principles of the revolution itself by rejecting the tenet of religious toleration, freedom of the press and the principle of equality.

The Pope further inflamed the situation when, after the declaration of war in April 1792 (see Chapter 13), his

representative stated that the war was a new crusade against a revolution that had rejected God. Pope Pius VI did not cause the punitive measures against **non-juring clergy**, but his statement contributed to the turning of public opinion against the French priests who would not take the clerical oath. This resulted in measures of the Terror to victimise clergy that were considered to be ‘disloyal’.

**non-juring clergy (or refractory clergy)** priests who refused to swear the oath of loyalty to the revolution required by the Civil Constitution of the Clergy



▲ Source 11.5 This satirical cartoon depicts St Peter at the gates of heaven denouncing Pope Pius VI.

## 11.4 The National Assembly asserts its authority

The deputies, accustomed to praise for their reforms, were stung by the opposition from the clergy. The clergy felt that significant changes, like the Pope no longer appointing bishops, could only be made in consultation with the Pope or at least in consultation with a Church assembly. On 27 November 1790, after two days of bitter debate, the National Assembly asserted its authority by requiring all priests, as civil servants, to take an oath of loyalty to the government that employed them. The deputies believed there would be little resistance.

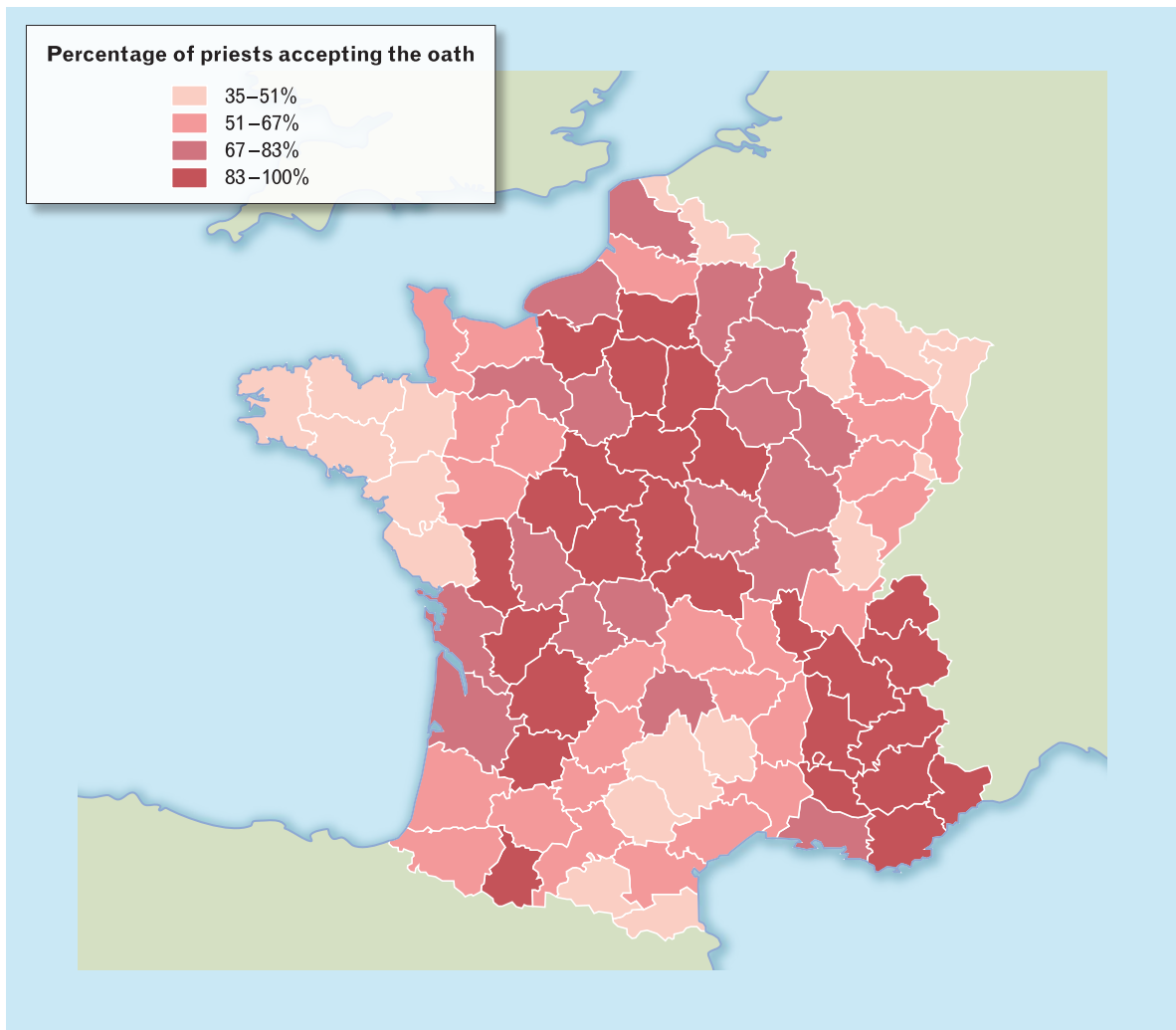
Their strongarm tactic was disastrous. Many priests regarded this as a matter of conscience. Forcing them to resist this specific reform pushed them to reject the whole revolution. Unwittingly, the National Assembly created a second large group of counter-revolutionaries where none had existed originally.

The king passed the decree requiring the clergy to make an oath of loyalty on 26 December 1790; the clergy had until 4 January 1791 to obey. The National Assembly believed few would refuse, for fear of losing their salaries. The oath-taking began in the National Assembly, where the first oath was taken by the Abbé Grégoire. But, the proceedings stalled: only 2 of 44 bishops took the oath, and the majority of clerical deputies, the priests, simply refused to swear allegiance, with only 109 declaring their loyalty.



▲ Source 11.6 A member of the clergy refuses to take the oath.

By January and February 1791, the situation was poisonous. First, the priests who refused the oath were named refractory (or non-juring) clergy. The ‘refractories’ were intimidated by the revolutionary crowd; in Paris, few priests dared to refuse the obligation. Across France, the National Assembly faced a disastrous backlash. The average rate of refusal was 50 per cent of the clergy overall, although the actual average per region varied enormously from almost complete obedience to almost complete refusal.



▲ Source 11.7 The rate of priests taking the oath of loyalty across France



▲ Source 11.8 These engravings express anger at the 'bad' (i.e. non-juring) priests (left) and support for the good (i.e. juring) priests (right).

Then, after the Pope's condemnation, there was another ominous development. The king had approved the Civil Constitution of the Clergy and the oath only because the French bishops had advised him to do so. Louis XVI considered himself to be a Catholic king and acknowledged the Pope's spiritual authority. The king now withdrew his support for the constitution. He made his feelings clear: when the king's personal priest took the oath, Louis rejected him, then very publicly took communion from a refractory priest. This sharpened doubts about the king's loyalty to the revolution.

### FOCUS QUESTIONS 11.2

- 1 Why did many priests resist the reforms of the Church?
- 2 Why did the National Assembly feel it had the right to force priests to agree to the reforms?

Louis XVI was convinced that he could not cooperate with the revolution and equally that he could not safely coexist with it. Since he could not be reconciled with the new order, he would have to leave it altogether.

## Why did the king begin to resist the revolution?

The Church reform was, arguably, the first great mistake of the revolution – historian Andre Latreille calls it a 'tragic error' – and although it occurred without malice, it was still disastrous. As 1791 progressed, it became clear that there were other divisive forces active. To understand these, we must analyse the French political landscape.



▲ Source 11.9 An effigy of Pope Pius VI is burned on the grounds of the Palais-Royal in 1791.

## 11.5 The making of France's constitution

Having demanded a constitutional monarchy, the revolutionaries wrote the constitution to define such a political system. They worked quickly and efficiently to create a system in which the executive power, including the power of the king, was carefully limited, and in which considerable authority was given to the **legislature**.

**legislature** law-making body

There was no question that the king would remain, but his power was now counter-balanced by a parliament. His title was 'Louis, King of the French', rather than 'King of France', indicating that he did not 'own' the country. The monarch was now a public servant, paid by the nation. He had real executive power because he appointed ministers but, once chosen, the ministers were accountable to the National Assembly. In diplomacy, the monarch kept the power to declare war and conclude peace, subject to approval, as well as to appoint his foreign ambassadors and senior military commanders.



▲ **Source 11.10** This portrait shows Louis XVI as a king who has accepted the constitutional monarchy: he wears the *tricolore* cockade and holds a sword labelled 'Law'.

The main limitations on the king's power restricted him to a purely executive role (running government), and forbade him to interfere with the legislature. For example, he could never close the National Assembly.

## Sources of division: The king's suspensive veto

The king could interfere with the National Assembly's work by his suspensive veto. He could not stop laws from being passed, but could delay them for four years.

The Constitution of 1791 created a legislature called the National Assembly. It was a single-chamber legislature, unlike the British and American models, which had two houses. The National Assembly represented the nation, from which all authority flowed; it accordingly held supreme power. Since the crisis that created it was about the approval of new taxes, it had ultimate authority over all fiscal matters.

## Sources of division: Active citizens and passive citizens

The Constitution of 1791 did not grant universal suffrage. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen stated that all citizens would participate in passing laws – either directly *or through representatives* – but it did not guarantee universal suffrage. The constitution divided citizens into those who paid taxes that

were equivalent to three days' wages and those who did not.

Specifically, a citizen had to be male (thus excluding 50 per cent of the population), resident in their home for a year (thus excluding all travelling working people), not engaged in domestic service (thus excluding all servants) and paying the equivalent of three days' labour in taxes. This was a democracy for property holders.

Many people earned enough to pay three days' wages in tax – about 70 per cent of the population qualified to be active citizens and vote at the first level, forming an electorate of five to six million people in a population of 28 million. Historian George Rudé argues that these conditions were not as narrow as in Britain at that time, so France was, relatively speaking, 'democratic'.

**KEY STATISTIC** 



▲ Source 11.11 The constitution is a 'present for the nobility'.

## 11.6 The betrayal that divided the revolution: The king's flight to Varennes

The Constitution of 1791 contained the makings of a serious crisis, as the National Assembly had to submit the constitution to the king for approval. Would he accept it?

Recent events had helped make up the king's mind. He later stated that the breaking point occurred when members of the royal family tried to leave Paris for their holiday at Saint-Cloud and were stopped by a jeering, angry crowd that surrounded their carriage. Not even the popular Lafayette could persuade them to let the king continue. The king also could not convince his guards to let him pass: when he ordered them to open the palace doors and to clear a way, they refused. Louis XVI and his family sat in the coach for nearly two hours while members of the crowd hurled abuse and obscenities at them.

At the same time, their protector, the revolutionary leader Mirabeau, unexpectedly died. Marie-Antoinette detested the revolution and warned the king against further hesitation. She argued that the revolution was a plot by disloyal members of the nobility, such as Lafayette, aided by dishonest members of the Third Estate, whom she called 'tramps'.

In addition, ex-ministers such as Calonne and Breteuil warned him that the only safe place was overseas. His military adviser, Bouillé, assured him that he could reach the army garrison at Montmédy, gather loyal troops, call in Austrian troops, then crush the revolution.



At midnight on 20 June 1791, the royal family departed. The escape was planned in great detail, involving disguises, two separate coaches and relays of fresh horses along the way. However, various mishaps, such as broken wheels, delayed the escape, causing the complicated arrangements to fail.



▲ **Source 11.12** This map shows the route of the royal family towards Varennes (red) and their return route (blue). The map makes it clear how close they came to safety, represented by the border of the Austrian Netherlands (purple), where Austrian troops waited to rescue them.

Meanwhile, news of the king's flight reached Paris and messengers were sent galloping to France's borders. One messenger got to Sainte-Menehould before the royal party; there, a postmaster, alerted to look for the fugitives, recognised Marie-Antoinette. To double check, he looked closely at the king's face and then compared it with the image of the king on a bank note. Nonetheless, Louis XVI managed to leave for Varennes, where he was recognised, detained and, the following morning, returned under escort to Paris.

His attempt to flee France put him under heavy suspicion, but was worsened by the fact that he left behind a document stating that he rejected the revolution.

#### AMAZING BUT TRUE ...

The flight of the royal family was almost ruined by mishaps. At one point, the children's governess, the Duchess of Tourzel, had to quickly hide the young Dauphin in her wide skirts so that Lafayette would not see that the boy was fully dressed so late at night. At another point, when Marie-Antoinette crept out of the palace in disguise, she almost bumped into Lafayette, but hid in the shadow of a doorway. He did not see her, thus failing to stop the attempted escape that changed the course of the French Revolution.



▲ **Source 11.13** *Left:* This painting by Lesueur imagines the dramatic scene when Louis XVI was arrested at Varennes. *Right:* This engraving does not accept the official story that the king had been kidnapped: it is titled *The Arrest of the King during his flight to Varennes*.

## The return of the king and the royal family to Paris

Until the flight to Varennes, the king enjoyed considerable popularity, both in his traditional role as the ‘father of the nation’ and in his more recent role as the apparent supporter of the revolution. Upon his return, he found the mood of the people of Paris utterly changed. The crowds lining the streets stood in sullen silence, refusing to lift their hats as the carriage went by.



▲ **Source 11.14** This engraving shows the silent crowds that stood angrily by the roadside as the carriage transporting the royal family re-entered Paris.



## The anger of the revolutionary crowd

The engraving in Source 11.15 shows the fury of the Parisian crowd after the royal family's flight to Varennes. The people moved through the city tearing down all symbols of monarchy, even innocent tavern names such as 'The King's Arms'. Source 11.16 shows the revolutionary crowd in Strasbourg, who made effigies (dummies) of the people involved in planning the flight to Varennes, paraded them through the streets and then burned them.



▼ **Source 11.16** The revolutionary crowd in Strasbourg burning effigies of those involved in planning the flight to Varennes

► **Source 11.15** The fury of the Parisian crowd after the flight to Varennes



### ANALYSIS ACTIVITY 11.1: READING A PRIMARY SOURCE



#### The crowd's reaction to Varennes

The following is an eye-witness account of the royal family's return to Paris:

*Surrounded by a barrier of five hundred thousand citizens, of whom a large number were armed, Louis XVI, his wife and sister arrived at the Tuileries [the royal residence in Paris]. No sign of disapproval, no apparent sign of contempt escaped from the numerous gathering. It was limited to denying any military honours to these fugitives. They were received with grounded arms. All the citizens kept their hats on their heads as if in common agreement.*

**Source 11.17** Adapted from the original document cited in Leonard Cowie, *The French Revolution*, 1987, p. 73

- 1 Although the crowd made no verbal statement of disapproval, their behaviour showed real disrespect for the royal family. How was this expressed?
- 2 How do we know that this 'silent protest' had not been organised by a revolutionary leader?

ANALYSIS ACTIVITY 11.2: READING A PRIMARY SOURCE



An image of royal disgrace

Look at Source 11.18, then answer the questions that follow.



▲ **Source 11.18** This popular engraving, *The Family of Pigs Brought Back to the Sty*, was made within days of the flight to Varennes, and had been drawn, printed and sold by 25 June 1791.

- 1 Why would this 'farmyard' image have been an effective way of communicating a message to ordinary French people?
- 2 Recalling the several strands of royal power, which strand would have been most affected by a demeaning image such as this?

## The effect of the flight to Varennes on the development of the revolution

deposed  
overthrown

The flight to Varennes was the second great turning point in the revolution. If the king was **deposed**, there could be no constitutional monarchy: his two brothers were in exile and his son was too young to rule. Most deputies preferred a moderate constitutional monarchy and feared a radical republic.

The second problem was psychological; if the king meant to leave the country, it was to join the revolution's enemies, Austrian troops or emigrated French nobles. There was a panicky sense of threat from enemies waiting to attack, which became one of the great accelerators of the revolutionary situation.

## Attempts to save the constitutional monarchy

The first challenge was to save the monarchy. The National Assembly constructed a new version of events, stating that the royal family had been 'kidnapped' by counter-revolutionaries. Fortunately, the story ran, the patriots at Varennes had 'rescued' the royal family and returned them to safety. The National Assembly later decreed that this story was true.

## Radical agitation against the king

The National Assembly's handling of this crisis ignored that the political scene had become more complicated. The new element was the political clubs, which had grown in popularity since 1789. The first to act was the Cordeliers Club. On 24 June 1791, its members petitioned the National Assembly to depose the king. A crowd of 30 000 people presented the document. The club movement had linked up with the popular movement. The Parisian crowd was angry and methodically destroyed all symbols of monarchy.



▲ **Source 11.19** This engraving expresses popular anger at politicians such as Barnave, who attempted to save the constitutional monarchy by persuading the king to accept the Constitution of 1791.

The same agitation occurred in the radical clubs. The most important was the Jacobin Club, which now had a network of about 900 clubs across France. At this stage, being Jacobin did not necessarily mean being radical; the club originally included all shades of opinion. In 1791, many Jacobins were dissatisfied with the way the National Assembly had handled the question of the king. Many believed that the king should be deposed and some suggested that he should be put on trial for treason. A few went further, calling for a new political system – a republic.

When the National Assembly declared the king free of all blame on 15 July 1791, radical members of the Social Circle Club joined with the Jacobin Club to demand that the king not be restored to office. They planned a public petition on the Altar to the Fatherland in the Champ de Mars. Later, the militants changed the manifesto, declaring that, by leaving, the king had abdicated and could not be reinstated unless the whole nation decided that he should be. It did not mention the word 'republic', but it put an end to the monarchy. Many members of the Jacobin Club, like Lafayette, resigned and formed the Feuillants Club.

## The massacre on the Champ de Mars, 17 July 1791

On 17 July 1791, a crowd of 50 000 flowed into the Champ de Mars. People were signing the petition when the crowd turned on two suspicious individuals and prepared to murder them. The Mayor of Paris, Bailly, called in the National Guard to restore order. Lafayette arrived with his guards and gave a warning to disperse. Stones were thrown, shots were fired and suddenly the guards opened fire into the dense crowd. About 50 people were killed and many more were injured.

► **Source 11.20** In the Champ de Mars massacre, the National Guard opened fire on a revolutionary crowd signing a petition demanding that the king be deposed.



This was a crucial turning point in the revolution because here, for the first time, revolutionaries fired on fellow revolutionaries, not on the forces of the old regime. This massacre revealed that there was no longer one French Revolution but two and that they were now in conflict. The first revolution was the liberal project of 1789; the king would stay and would rule with close accountability to the National Assembly. But, the second revolution, the one forming in 1791, was more radical: it would insist that the monarch be deposed, the constitutional monarchy be ended and, finally, a republic be established.

In the short term, the moderate revolution won. The police arrested 200 political militants and important figures, such as Danton, fled overseas, while others, like Marat, went into hiding. The more radical clubs, such as the Social Circle, closed down, as did some radical newspapers. The opposition seemed to be intimidated.



▲ Source 11.21 *Massacre of the Patriots at the Champ de Mars, 17th July 1791* by Louis Lafitte

## Lafayette suffers from the tensions within the revolution

In the longer term, what effects did this event have on revolutionary leaders such as Lafayette? If 1790 had been the year of Lafayette, 1791 was the year in which divisions became obvious in France, and in which suspicions about the king, the nobles and the Church worsened. Lafayette's position was undermined by two conflicting forces. As people became more suspicious of the king, they became increasingly suspicious of Lafayette himself. Additionally, as protector of both the king and the National Assembly, and defender of property against popular disorder, Lafayette was increasingly finding himself in an ambivalent situation.

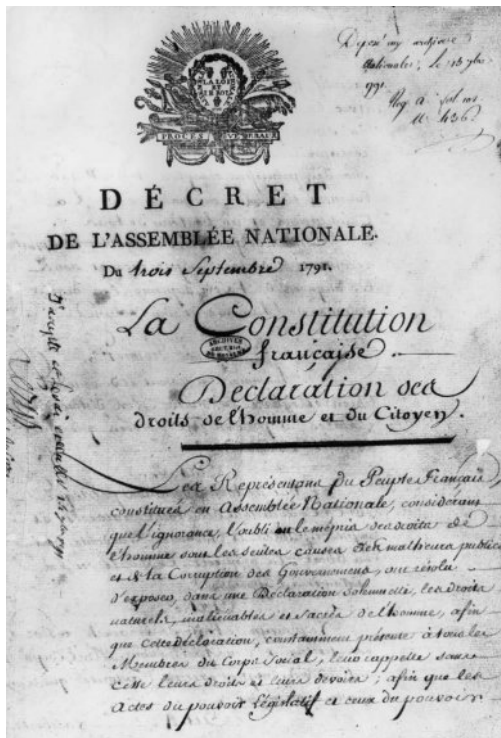
By now, the tension between crowd action and legality was acute, and Lafayette used bullets – rather than his popularity – to control the people. This was the first of a number of critical incidents in which Lafayette's leadership was destroyed by the very forces that had created it.



▲ Source 11.22 This engraving shows that the sense of disunity and suspicion typical of 1791 affected even the popular Lafayette.

## 11.7 The king accepts the Constitution of 1791

There was now an urgent priority to clinch the revolution's constitutional achievements; the National Assembly was desperate for Louis XVI to accept the Constitution of 1791. The National Assembly worked hard to negotiate a compromise with the king. It declared that the Civil Constitution of the Clergy was not a part of the Constitution of 1791, so the king could accept one without accepting the other. It also softened the punishments meted out to refractory clergy. The National Assembly declared the constitution complete on 3 September 1791. On 13 September, they presented the Constitution of 1791 to the King and the following day he signed it.



▲ Source 11.23 The Constitution of 1791. The royal signature is in the left-hand margin.



▲ Source 11.24 When the king accepted the Constitution of 1791 in September 1791, he hoped the revolution was over. In fact, his own actions had doomed the revolutions to continue and, finally, to take his life.

### ANALYSIS ACTIVITY 11.3: READING A PRIMARY SOURCE



#### The king's new position as civil servant

A report from the newspaper *La Mercure de France*, 14 September 1791:

*At the moment that the king spoke the words 'I swear to be faithful to the nation', the Assembly sat and, for the first time in the life of Louis XVI, for the first time since the foundation of the monarchy, saw the king as no more than their chief salaried official, legally liable to dethronement. After the words 'National Constituent Assembly', the king, seeing that he alone was standing, looked around the chamber with a gaze in which graciousness was tempered by surprise, and his majesty sat and continued his speech.*

Source 11.25 Adapted from the original document cited in Leonard Cowie, *The French Revolution*, 1987, p. 73

- 1 Why did this ceremony signal a complete reversal of the origins of power in France?
- 2 Why had the king become no more than a high civil servant?



► **Source 11.26** This engraving is not literal: the king was never kept in a cage, but he may have felt as if he was. The figure at right, a member of the Third Estate, asks him what he is doing, and Louis XVI replies, 'I am vetoing'.



## The revolution is over ...

When Louis XVI accepted the Constitution of 1791, he declared, 'The revolution is Over'. Or so he believed and his supporters hoped. Tragically, the king's oath did not guarantee acceptance of the principles of 1789 or completion of the revolution. Louis XVI revealed his real thoughts to friends when he commented cynically, 'Giving the impression of adopting the new ideas is the safest way of quickly defeating them.'

### THE STORY SO FAR

What were the problems facing the revolution by 1791?

First, the nation was bitterly divided over the issue of the Catholic Church reforms and thousands of priests had been transformed into enemies of the revolution. Tragically, the revolution had created its own counter-revolutionaries. Second, the king's reputation was now poisoned by suspicions of treason, vividly expressed in hostile cartoons. Third, the revolutionaries had polarised into those supporting a constitutional monarchy and those preferring a republic. Fourth, this **incipient** republican movement became linked with radicalism and the dangerous idea that the revolution must go further. The republican movement was also increasingly associated with the Parisian popular movement, which aimed to depose the king and install a republic. Finally, the revolution had divided the nation on more than ideological grounds: revolutionaries had fired on revolutionaries. People realised that within this one revolution were two conflicting understandings of transformation. This was obvious when the conservatives celebrated the massacre. According to Marie-Antoinette's sister, the shooting showed that the demonstrators belonged to the rabble who needed to be punished. The National Guard who shot them belonged to the responsible, property-owning bourgeoisie, keen to defend law and order.

**incipient** beginning to develop

The events of 1791 redirected power to new political figures. Those who tried to protect the monarchy, such as Mirabeau and Lafayette, were discredited. Even radical deputies like Barnave, who negotiated with Louis over the Constitution of 1791, lost support. Radical politicians remained untouched by the scandal and now enjoyed increasing support from the working-class popular movement. Maximilien de Robespierre controlled the Jacobin Club when many other deputies walked out, and proceeded to rebuild the club and to consolidate his popular support.

Finally, most dangerously, foreign rulers reconsidered this revolution and concluded that the lives of the royal family were under threat.

Use the QR code or visit the **Interactive Textbook** and watch the video summarising the chapter.



## Develop your historical-thinking skills

### Using historical terms meaningfully

- Write an extended paragraph analysing how and why the useful structural reform of the Catholic Church in France created the first, nation-wide division within the French Revolution. For what reasons might the National Assembly have felt that it had both the right and the mandate to create administrative reforms of the Church? Given that the clergy had requested many of these reforms, how did the Civil Constitution of the Clergy effectively divide the entire French nation against itself, creating bitter enemies among a group that had previously supported the revolution? Use the following terms and phrases to show you understand their meaning and context:
  - pluralism
  - absenteeism
  - clerical salaries
  - nationalisation of Church property
  - Civil Constitution of the Clergy
  - decree requiring an oath of loyalty
  - the Pope's condemnation
  - juring clergy
  - non-juring ('refractory') clergy.
- Write an extended paragraph explaining why the flight to Varennes and the protests it created at the Champ de Mars caused political divisions that effectively split the revolution in two, setting the popular revolutionary movement against the National Assembly. Use the following phrases to show you understand their meaning and context:
  - the role of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette, and their advisors
  - the failure of the plan
  - the reaction of the Parisian crowd
  - expressions of anger in acts and images
  - the Cordeliers Club petition to depose the king
  - demonstration in the Champ de Mars
  - Champ de Mars massacre
  - division between the National Assembly and the revolutionary movement.

### Analysing cause and consequence

Explain why the reform of the Catholic Church was both a significant achievement in the reorganisation of France and an unexpected cause of division in the revolution.



## Constructing historical arguments

‘The creation of the new society involves changes that arouse opposition. In most cases, it is this opposition that forces the revolution to become more radical.’ To what extent is this true of the French Revolution by the end of 1791?

## Analysing historian’s interpretations

### George Rudé (1910–1993)

*Historian George Rudé wrote:*

*Why had the situation changed so abruptly [by the end of 1791]? In the first place, the king had only accepted the constitution with his tongue in his cheek: long before it had been signed, he had made an unsuccessful bid to seek safety in flight and, having been returned ignominiously [ingloriously] to his capital, he continued to intrigue with the rulers of Sweden, Prussia and Austria for the restoration of his old authority by force of arms. [The nobles] formed a constant focal point of dissension, sullen resentment and suspicion, and provoked the revolutionary authorities to take ever harsher measures to restrain their liberties and keep them in check. More serious perhaps was the division caused among the clergy by the new Church settlement ... These dissensions would, in themselves, have made it impossible to arrest the course of the revolution ... Yet it was not only the opposition of forces having more to lose than to gain by the revolution that drove it onwards, but, perhaps even more, the intervention of classes that had looked to the outbreak of 1789 for a solution to their problems and whose initial hopes had, in the outcome, been disappointed or only partially fulfilled.*

Source 11.27 George Rudé, *The French Revolution*, 1988, pp. 71–2

- 1 Who, according to Rudé, were the main sources of opposition to the revolution?
- 2 Why can the constructive reform of the Catholic Church in France be seen as one of the causes of this crisis?
- 3 Rudé mentions, but does not name, people who had supported the revolution but by now had been disappointed with its achievements. Who might these people have been?

## Using quotes as evidence

Write a sentence using a short phrase from one of the quotes below or contrast the views from a few of the quotes. You can also use any of the quotes in the chapter. Any quotes you choose can be used directly or paraphrased into your own words.

### Civil Constitution of the Clergy

*The deep divisions and hostility that the settlement provoked were due to circumstances outside the Constituents’ control. It had been generally accepted ... that the Church was in grave need of reform.*

**George Rudé, historian**

*It was the beginning of the first, deepest, and most persistent polarization of the French Revolution.*

**William Doyle, historian**

*If there was a point at which the French Revolution ‘went wrong’, it was ... the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. This marked the end of national unity, and the beginning of civil war.*

**John McManners, historian**



*The oath to the Civil Constitution is rightly considered one of the great crises of the revolution because it gave the counter-revolution a popular base ... In other words, to reject the revolution was to reject the rule of the citizen-lawyers who had come to power in 1790.*

**D.M.G. Sutherland, historian**

### **The Constitution of 1791**

*The Assembly was thus made master of the state, and the Assembly was the French bourgeoisie.*

**Georges Lefebvre, historian**

*The essence of the Constitution of 1791 ... was to keep the executive weak. Despotism must have no opportunity to revive in France.*

**William Doyle**

*Sovereignty passed officially from the monarch to his people but the former remained as head of state, shorn of divine sanction but now ... the embodiment of the popular will.*

**Nigel Aston, historian**

*The 1791 Constitution ... became obsolete before it even came into action.*

**Judy Anderson and Jill Fenwick**

### **The flight to Varennes, 20–22 July 1791**

*The initiative of Louis XVI himself precipitated the conflict that brought his downfall.*

**Georges Lefebvre**

*The flight to Varennes opened up the second great schism of the revolution. There had been hardly any republicanism in 1789 ...*

**William Doyle**



# 12

## THE REVOLUTIONARY EVENTS OF 1792

*Power now lay not with the [National] Assembly, but with the new  
Paris Commune.*

– WILLIAM DOYLE, 1989

## Overview

By early 1792, it was clear that the French Revolution was not, as the king had said, 'over'. The all-powerful popular movement pushed the revolution into more radical areas. We must now trace the reasons for the radicalisation of the revolution in 1792.



It was unexpected circumstances, rather than the nature of revolution itself, that drove this revolutionary project to extremes that no deputy could have predicted in 1789. We will witness a chain of consequences, revealing how the revolutionaries were virtually dragged into a complex conflict made up of a number of interlocking crises.

## Key issues

- How did foreign powers put pressure on the revolution in August 1791?
- What was the significance of the Legislative Assembly?
- Why did the revolution participate in international war?
- Why did the experience of war radicalise the revolution?

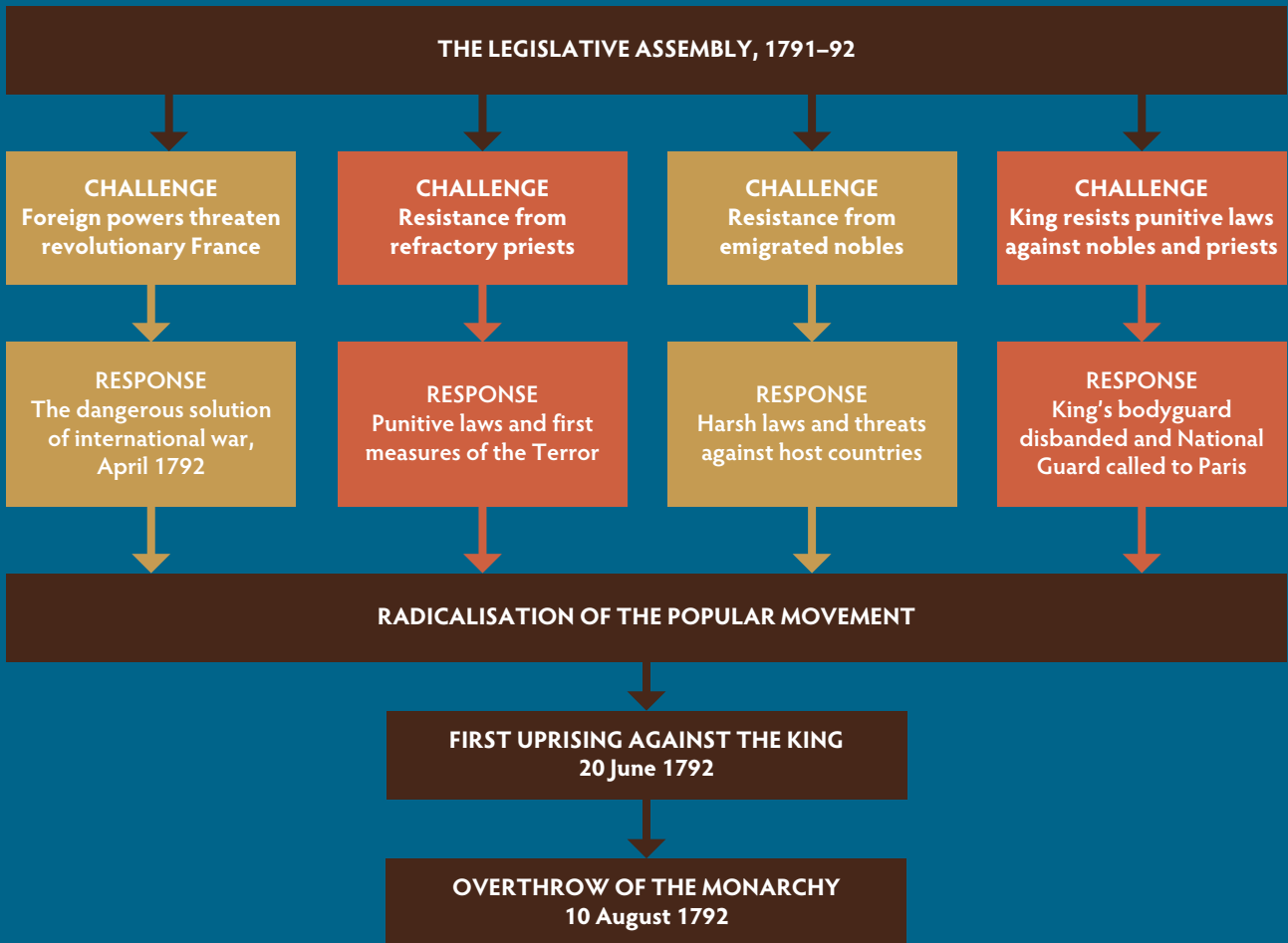
## Digital resources for this chapter

In the *Interactive Textbook*:

-  video and audio sources and questions
-  digital activities.

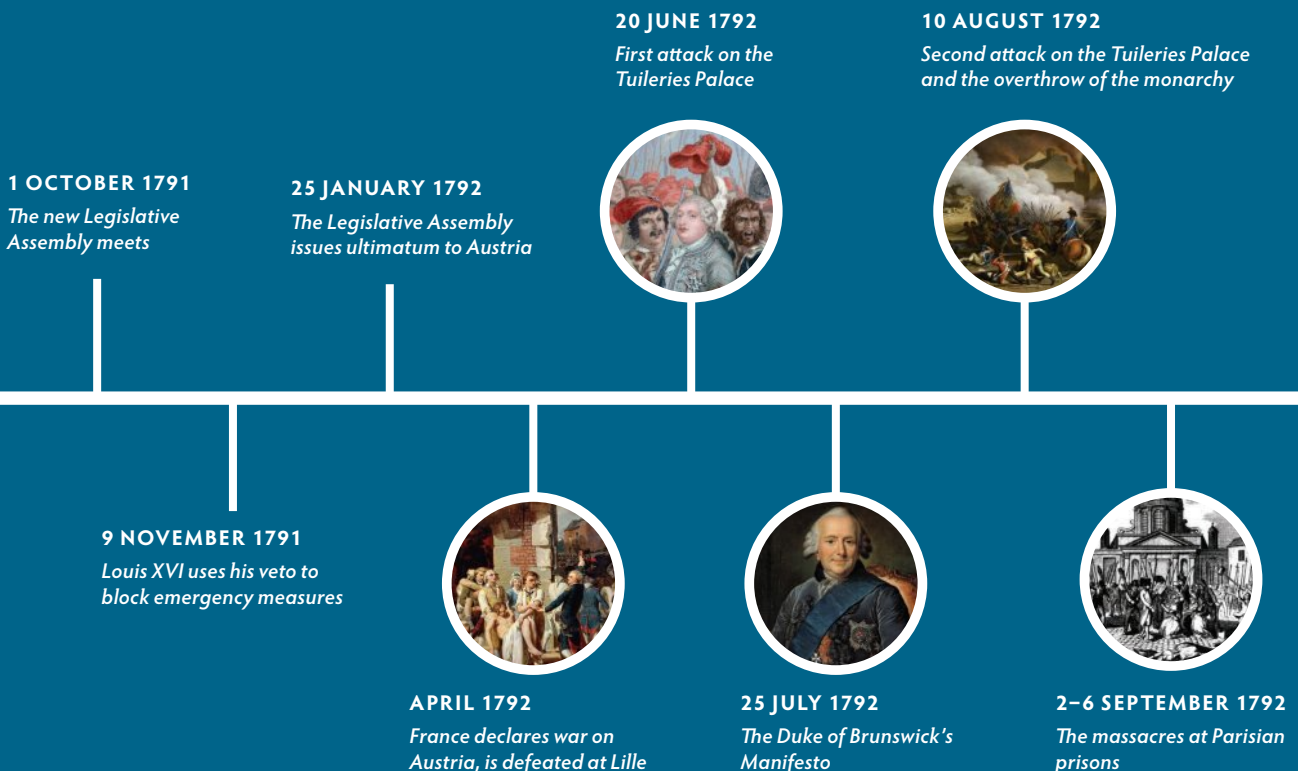
◀ **Source 12.0** *Departure of the Paris National Guard, September 1792* by Léon Cogniet, 1836

# Flow of chapter



200

# Chapter timeline



## 12.1 How did foreign powers put pressure on the revolution?

During 1791–92, the revolution faced the new threat of foreign intervention. Initially, the foreign response to the French Revolution was cautious. In 1789, British liberals hailed the revolution as the beginning of constitutional monarchy in France. Austrian Emperor Leopold II accepted France's constitutional monarchy, hoping that his powerful rival would be less able to dominate international affairs.

However, disturbed by the imprisonment of the royal family after the flight to Varennes, he demanded their safety. The Emperor's Declaration of Pillnitz on 27 August 1791 warned that the European monarchies might restore Louis XVI's authority. The National Assembly ignored this challenge.

## 12.2 New leaders, new challenges: The Legislative Assembly

The National Constituent Assembly closed on 30 September 1791 and was replaced with the Legislative Assembly on 1 October 1791. The new political team guiding the revolution comprised more practical, determined men who introduced a new style of politics.

Socially, the Legislative Assembly consisted of 745 deputies elected on a high-property qualification; that is, it was a parliament of comfortably rich men. However, its membership was narrower; it was almost completely bourgeois, containing few nobles, only 23 clergy and no urban workers or peasants.

Politically, the Legislative Assembly was controlled initially by conservatives, but radicals slowly gained control and radicalised policies. There were no distinct political parties; the deputies were grouped informally in voting 'blocs' (rather than formal parties). They were all new to national politics – the deputies of the previous Constituent National Assembly had, at Robespierre's suggestion, been banned from sitting in the new assembly.

On the political right, 264 deputies belonged to the Feuillants Club, which believed that the revolution should stop at the constitutional monarchy. Prominent were Lafayette, the commander of the National Guard; Bailly, the Mayor of Paris; and Barnave, who had urged the king to accept the constitution. They were 'new conservatives' with conviction, prepared to use violence to stop the revolution going any further – Bailly sent the National Guard to stop the Champ de Mars Petition and Lafayette gave the order to fire.



▲ Source 12.1 The medal of the Legislative Assembly



▲ Source 12.2 *Left:* Lafayette. *Centre:* Jean-Sylvain Bailly. *Right:* Antoine Barnave

On the political left was a loose coalition of several small groups of more radical deputies, sometimes named simply after their leader: the followers of Brissot were the ‘Brissotins’; and the followers of Roland were the ‘Rolandists’. There was also an influential group of brilliant speakers, such as P.V. Vergniaud, who came from the region of the Gironde in south-west France. However, historian Gary Kates points out that the term ‘Girondin’ did not come into common use until later, during the National Convention.



▲ Source 12.3 *Left:* Pierre Vergniaud. *Center:* Madame Roland, whose salons were attended by Rolandists. *Right:* Jacques Pierre Brissot

In the centre was a larger group of 350 non-aligned deputies. In this parliament, outcomes would depend on whether the conservatives or the radicals managed to win over these independent voters.

## Resistance from refractory priests

The Legislative Assembly feared the growing conflict over the Catholic Church reforms. Many deputies came from departments where serious resistance caused local governments to repress refractory priests as enemies of the revolution. Reports flooded in of increasing resistance, including a massive 90 per cent refusal rate in the Vendée in the west of France. The Legislative Assembly passed harsher laws against refractory priests: they must take the oath of loyalty or lose their government pension. Priests who had twice refused the oath were declared to be suspects, subjected to police surveillance and deported.

## The emigrated nobles

The Legislative Assembly was equally concerned about the increasing emigration of nobles, who joined the armies gathering on the borders of France. The revolutionaries offered an **amnesty** to nobles, but few accepted. Some 6000 army officers had fled the country by late 1791, depleting the French army of 60 per cent of its officers and expertise.

The Legislative Assembly invented government by Terror, using laws to intimidate the revolution's enemies. Deputy Brissot demanded that emigrated nobles return or lose their property on 20 October 1791. He also proposed war against countries harbouring emigrated nobles. Brissot's followers, the **Brissotins**, constituted a loose group supporting these strong-arm policies. They declared that nobles remaining abroad after 1 January 1792 were enemies of the revolution who deserved execution.

**amnesty** guaranteed safe return

**Brissotins** the followers of the radical politician Brissot in the Legislative Assembly (1791–92); they advocated revolutionary war and punitive policies against refractory priests and emigrated nobles

## The growth of the Jacobin Club

The Jacobin Club, weakened by the walkout of moderates like Lafayette, now recovered under Robespierre's leadership. People supported Robespierre and Pétion as serious politicians, who in turn drew confidence from the rowdy approval of the large crowds in the Jacobin Club. When Robespierre and Pétion returned to the National Convention (the legislative body that was formed after the Legislative Assembly), they brought that popular radicalism with them. The conservative Feuillants Club, in contrast, declined rapidly.

## The king obstructs emergency measures

The Legislative Assembly's harsh laws required the king's approval. He **vetoed** these radical laws against nobles and priests. People now realised that the king would repeatedly block revolutionary laws and wondered what would happen when emergency measures were needed. This increased their doubts about the king's loyalty.

**vetoed** blocked an action through power or right



### FOCUS QUESTIONS 12.1

- 1 Why did the new politicians of the Legislative Assembly feel that they were facing a number of serious challenges?
- 2 What techniques did these deputies use to deal with the challenges?

◀ **Source 12.4** This sarcastic cartoon expresses the bitterness and hatred of the king by 1792. Using religious language, it names the king 'Saint Veto', and calls him the patron saint of emigrated nobles and refractory priests.

## 12.3 Dangerous solutions: The option of international war

During late 1791, there was increasing discussion of war as an instrument of revolutionary policy. Tragically, people of all political persuasions saw war as a solution for the revolution's problems. In reality, this disastrous and costly war would ultimately be the single greatest force radicalising and endangering the revolution.

Brissot wanted to use war to prevent foreign governments from harbouring emigrated nobles, but a broad group of left-wing deputies also claimed that it would carry revolutionary freedoms to oppressed peoples in Europe. They felt that the king, nobles and priests would also be forced to declare their loyalty, and a war would draw attention away from political divisions at home and unify people again in a shared patriotism. The radicals also hoped that they could win over the independents by the patriotic appeal of war.

The suggestion of war suited nearly everybody else for varying reasons. The king and queen cynically encouraged a hopeless war that would allow foreign armies to invade France, crush the revolution and restore the monarchy. Conservative deputies supported war because they hoped that success would strengthen the monarchy. Lafayette hoped to revive his dwindling popularity by new military exploits.

On 14 December 1791, Louis XVI agreed to threaten German princes who were sheltering emigrated nobles, but when the princes obeyed, the excuse for war seemed lost. Yet, the idea was too useful to too many people to be abandoned altogether. Only Robespierre and some Jacobins saw the danger; if the French won a war, it would strengthen nobles like Lafayette, while if they lost, foreign armies would crush the revolution. Sadly, Robespierre's self-exclusion from the Legislative Assembly limited his speeches to the Jacobin Club.

### Renewed threat from the Austrian Emperor

The Brissotin campaign for war strengthened. On 21 December 1791, the Austrian Emperor, outraged by the ultimatum to the princes, promised to defend them. The Legislative Assembly cancelled existing Austrian–French peace treaties, declaring the royal princes guilty of high treason and instructing Louis XVI to demand that Austria renounce all treaties hostile to France or face war. In February 1792, Austria, far from conceding, signed a military alliance with Prussia against revolutionary France.

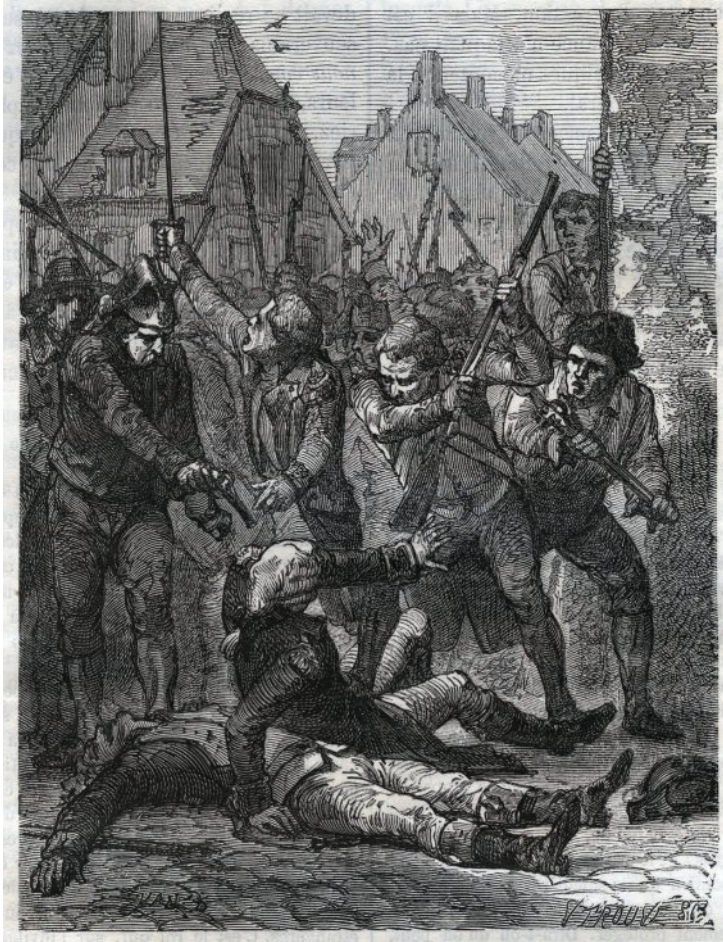
### The Brissotins create a 'war' ministry

The Girondin supporters of war recruited numbers from the independent deputies. In March 1792, they forced the king to replace a pacifist ministry with pro-war Brissotins, such as Clavière, Roland and Dumouriez, who controlled important ministries, including the one responsible for war. The Austrians mobilised their army and on 20 April 1792 Louis XVI prepared to declare war. Only seven deputies voted against the declaration. The Legislative Assembly indulged in ecstatic scenes of patriotic fervour.

### The unsuccessful start to the war

This optimism created by the declaration of war was ill-founded. Austria and Prussia had excellent professional armies. By contrast, with inexperienced recruits and lacking experienced officers, the French revolutionary armies soon crumbled. When the French army advanced into the Netherlands on 29 April 1792, it retreated in panic to Lille, where the troops murdered their own commander. By May 1792, defeat seemed imminent and the three commanders of France's armies recommended peace. Meanwhile, the Austrian and Prussian armies invaded France, creating the possibility that the revolution might really be crushed by foreign soldiers.





◀ **Source 12.5** This engraving is a representation of the events at Lille soon after war was declared. General Théobald Dillon failed in his attack on foreign forces at Tournai and was executed by his own troops.



▲ **Source 12.6** A depiction of the bombardment of Lille

## 12.4 The experience of war radicalises the revolution

### Panic, paranoia and repressive measures

Reports of defeat created panic, then accusations. People now condemned the Brissotins and Girondins for starting the war. Panic intensified existing fears and suspicion into full-blown paranoia. Political discussion focused on betrayal by the king or by his commanders. All foreigners in Paris were placed under police surveillance.

### The growing fear of a coup by the king

Since Louis XVI vetoed emergency measures against nobles and priests, his loyalty to the revolution was in doubt and there was a new and growing fear that the king might try an armed takeover. As a precaution, the Legislative Assembly disbanded the king's bodyguard and ordered all regular soldiers out of Paris.

### Enter the loyal National Guard

To replace the king's disbanded bodyguard and the regular soldiers, the Legislative Assembly ordered 20 000 members of the National Guard from the provinces to Paris to safeguard the revolution. This decree was made on 8 June 1792 to allow more troops to go to the front. The Brissotins also hoped the National Guard would be a reliable force against opposition to their rule. The National Guard volunteers marched across France, some of them singing a fiery patriotic song written by Rouget de Lisle, called 'La Marseillaise'.

However, the king vetoed these measures too, which further aggravated suspicion about his loyalty to the revolution.

On 13 June, the radical Brissotin minister, Roland, criticised the king's obstructiveness. Louis XVI responded by dismissing the radical Brissotin ministry. Lafayette ordered the Legislative Assembly to curb the radical clubs in Paris, but this created fears that he was the likely coup leader.

#### FOCUS QUESTIONS 12.2

- 1 Why did people of nearly all political opinions support the idea of international war as a solution to France's problems?
- 2 Why and how did the experience of war 'radicalise' the revolution?



◀ Source 12.7 This song-sheet and the painting by Lesueur show how 'La Marseillaise' instantly became popular, and was sung in cafes and taverns.

## The revolutionary upheaval

The popular movement, based in the municipal meetings of Paris, now demonstrated its power. The **sections** criticised the active–passive citizens division and admitted passive citizens – that is, working people – into their meetings.

**sections** municipal meetings

They stated that the true defenders of the revolution were the people, who should be armed with pikes. In 1792, the sections called a demonstration for 20 June, the anniversary of the Tennis Court Oath, to defend the revolution from its enemies, notably Lafayette.

The radical Cordeliers Club mobilised 8000 working people and radicalised members of the National Guard. They marched first on the Legislative Assembly, where the crowd sang the bloodthirsty revolutionary song, the ‘Ça Ira’, and paraded a calf’s heart impaled on a pike, labelled ‘The heart of an aristocrat’. The representatives of the nation sat in stunned silence for three hours, helpless before this popular movement.



◀ **Source 12.8**  
This engraving is a representation of the first invasion of the Tuileries Palace by the revolutionary crowd, imagined by painter Henri-Paul Motte around 1892.



The crowd then attacked the Tuileries Palace. They surrounded the king, making him wear the red bonnet and toast the nation. They demanded the end of Louis XVI’s veto and the recall of the Brissotin ministers. The king refused to do either. His calm response restored his prestige and the crowd withdrew.

This near-insurrection made the Brissotins more conservative and led them to defend the king. However, the Jacobins became more radical; Robespierre now opposed the Constitution of 1791 and on 29 July 1792 urged that the king be deposed.

◀ **Source 12.9** A member of the crowd thrusts a Phrygian bonnet upon Louis XVI.

## The opening up of the National Guard

The Paris Commune now argued that the emergency situation was so serious that any person who simply possessed a pike could be useful to defend the capital and so should be allowed into the National Guard.



▲ **Source 12.10** The opening up of the National Guard to working people changed its nature and function completely. No longer made up of bourgeois citizens, the National Guard was less likely to obey orders to repress crowd action.

## The homeland in danger

On 11 July 1792, the Legislative Assembly declared that the homeland was in danger – a total war emergency. The survival of the revolution itself would depend upon the nation's response to the challenge.



► **Source 12.11** This illustration from *Le Petit Journal* in 1894 depicts Félicité and Théophile de Fernig as French heroines. They were enrolled in the National Guard in 1792 at the ages of thirteen and sixteen respectively, and worked as aides to General Dumouriez during the war.

## The Duke of Brunswick's Manifesto

The commander of the Austrian–Prussian army, the Duke of Brunswick, declared on 25 July 1792 the population of Paris personally responsible for the safety of the royal family. He wrote that if royal family members were harmed, Austrian troops would subject the entire city to ‘military execution’, meaning destruction. Any members of the National Guard who fought against the oncoming army would be shot as a rebel. When this news reached Paris at the end of July, it provoked outrage, intensifying radical demands for the king's deposition.

► **Source 12.12** Charles William Ferdinand, the Duke of Brunswick



◄ **Source 12.13** In this comical engraving, a *sans-culotte* puts the Duke of Brunswick's manifesto to appropriate use.

## The formation of the revolutionary commune

The greatest challenge to the government was from the radical popular movement. The municipal government of Paris, originally set up as 48 administrative sections like local councils, had transformed itself into permanent political meetings. These now merged into one body, a virtual ‘parliament’ for the working people who were excluded from national assemblies. They were very radical indeed: 47 of the 48 units demanded the deposition of the king, if necessary by a second revolution. They planned a demonstration against the king for 10 August 1792. On 9 August, they proceeded to replace the Paris Commune with the **Insurrectionary Commune**, the ultimate in radical, grassroots democracy in the capital. The membership was heavily working class, with artisans outnumbering bourgeois two to one.

### Insurrectionary Commune

The Paris Commune became the Insurrectionary Commune in August 1792, refusing to take orders from the central French government and instead giving a voice to extreme views of the people

## The overthrow of the monarchy

By 10 August 1792, the Insurrectionary Commune had 20 000 people in the streets. They were no ‘rabble’, but included 400 volunteers from Marseilles and the National Guard from the rest of France. Casualty lists reveal that they included a broad spectrum of classes, from shopkeepers to small manufacturers and traders, master artisans and artisans. Fewer than 50 per cent of them were ordinary wage earners.





▲ **Source 12.14** This painting depicts the heavy fighting at the royal palace of the Tuileries on 10 August 1792.

**KEY STATISTIC**



At the Tuileries Palace, Louis XVI had just 900 mercenary Swiss guards, another 700 royalist volunteers and 2000 members of the National Guard, whose loyalty was doubtful. Alarmed, the king walked with his family to the nearby Legislative Assembly to seek protection. The deputies, equally scared of the crowd, unwillingly admitted him. The National Guard soon joined the demonstrators and the Marseilles volunteers asked the Swiss troops to surrender, but the Swiss refused and fired on the crowd. The crowd surged into the palace, murdering terrified servants and Swiss guards. Some were decapitated and their heads impaled on pikes, others were thrown from windows while still dying, and naked bodies of Swiss guards were dragged away for further desecration. About 300 defenders were killed in the actual fighting (as were 90 of the volunteers from Marseilles), but another 500 Swiss guards were slaughtered in cold blood.



◀ **Source 12.15** This drawing is a representation of the chaotic scenes in the Legislative Assembly, where the king sought refuge, causing the crowd to invade the building on 10 August 1792.

This 'second revolution' attacked both the monarchy and the Legislative Assembly. The militant crowd rejected parliamentary representative democracy, preferring the radical working-class form of government: popular democracy. The Insurrectionary Commune, formed by the people, was the new form of revolutionary government, aggressively demanding that the Legislative Assembly recognise it or risk insurrection. It demanded a new parliament elected by universal male suffrage and the surrender of the king to the people. The significance of this event is that the centre of power in the revolution shifted dramatically from the middle-class Legislative Assembly to the popular revolutionary movement.

### FOCUS QUESTIONS 12.3

- 1 Why did the popular movement overthrow the king in 1792?
- 2 How do we know that the popular movement in 1792 was becoming even more radical and independent than it had been before?

## The Legislative Assembly enacts the political agenda of the working-class movement

After 10 August 1792, the Legislative Assembly debated in a hall crowded with working people and obediently enacted the Insurrectionary Commune's demands. It suspended the king but did not depose him, leaving that to the next Assembly to decide. It established an interim government of six ministers and imposed all the laws previously blocked by royal veto. Finally, it allowed the creation of a National Convention, elected on the basis of universal male suffrage, which ultimately would replace the Legislative Assembly.

## The first measures of the Terror

The Legislative Assembly established a special Committee of Vigilance on 17 August 1792, which had extraordinary powers to arrest counter-revolutionaries. Historian Simon Schama believes that this marked the beginning of a revolutionary police state in France. It was certainly thorough, arresting approximately 1000 people on various pretexts and rounding up refractory priests; Danton, the new Minister of Justice, authorised 'home visits' to locate these 'enemies'.

All nobles feared for their lives; monarchists and constitutional monarchists hid. This left only about 300 deputies in the Legislative Assembly and the Brissotins, increasingly referred to now as the Girondins, in control. They passed harsh laws; refractory priests were deported and the property of emigrated nobles was seized. The land would be divided into small portions so that working people could buy allotments. To win back the rural areas, remaining feudal dues were abolished without compensation.

## The Jacobins establish their power in the radical Paris sections

However, even the harsh legislation in the first measures of the Terror could not close the gap between the Legislative Assembly and the popular revolution. While the Girondins dominated the Legislative Assembly, their enemies, the Jacobins, were gathering power in the Insurrectionary Commune. From this position of considerable popular strength, they could threaten the Legislative Assembly with further popular action. The king and his family were taken to the Temple Prison, a medieval dungeon, where they were kept under close and humiliating guard by revolutionary soldiers.

► **Source 12.16** The medieval dungeon of the Temple Prison, where the royal family was kept under close guard after 10 August 1792. The royal prince, later known as Louis XVII, died of mistreatment and ill-health there.





◀ Source 12.17 The royal family inside Temple Prison

## The threat of invasion

Meanwhile, the war faltered. On 2 September 1792, the Austrian army captured the last fortress before Paris, leaving no defences between the population and the Duke of Brunswick's threat. When the first stories of women being raped and babies being impaled on spikes reached Paris, the effect was electrifying. Imminent invasion usually causes panic, but this was not due solely to rumour; the invading army had stated its intention to punish Paris if the king or his family were harmed. This great psychological pressure point of the revolution generated a surge of patriotism and Paris sprang into intensive military preparations.

Military emergencies bring out new leaders. Danton was already a popular leader and member of the Insurrectionary Commune, enjoying such power over the crowd that the Legislative Assembly appointed him as a minister. He now used his influence over the people to organise an enormous war effort, speaking powerfully to prevent the Legislative Assembly from panic and defeatism. He galvanised the deputies into action, stating that no revolution had ever gained freedom without a struggle, and that it was a good thing that their enemies were so close at hand because they could finally engage with them and destroy them.



▲ Source 12.18 Left: Danton's portrait captures his fiery personality. Right: This painting by Lesueur shows the citizens who Danton inspired to make weapons in preparation for a final defence of Paris against the invading Austrians.



## The September massacres

The threat of invasion created panic, which generated aggression. Before the troops left Paris for the front, there was a serious outbreak of violence. People feared what might happen when Paris was left undefended and their fears turned into rumours. The popular press spread ominous rumours that ‘the prisons are full of conspirators’, while Marat urged people to attack prisons, and murder refractory priests and traitors, including the imprisoned Swiss guards.

According to Simon Schama, Fabre d’Églantine urged destroying internal enemies before they dealt with foreign opponents:

*Let the blood of traitors be the first holocaust to liberty, so that as we advance to meet the common enemy, we have got nothing behind us to threaten us.*

The rumour was that prisoners would escape and capture Paris until the Austrians arrived. This was unlikely, since the prisoners were only petty criminals, refractory priests and nobles. Vigilante groups formed juries, questioned prisoners and illegally condemned about 1200 to death, including 240 parish priests. Execution was usually carried out by beating the victims to death with metal bars.



◀ **Source 12.19**  
This engraving is a representation of the brutal and pointless massacre of women at the Salpêtrière Prison on 3 September 1792.



◀ **Source 12.20** This is a depiction of the massacre at Abbaye Prison.



KEY  
EVENT



At the Abbaye Prison, the murder squads carried hatchets, razors and saws, and under the guidance of a local butcher literally hacked 19 priests to death. At the Salpêtrière Prison, which imprisoned prostitutes, innocent women were massacred. Aristocratic women were also attacked. One famous victim was the Princesse de Lamballe, who had been a friend and lady-in-waiting to Marie-Antoinette. Her head was impaled on a pike and displayed to Marie-Antoinette at the Temple Prison.

▼ **Source 12.21** *Left:* The unfortunate Princesse de Lamballe. *Right:* In this engraving, the crowd is shown carrying her head to the prison where Marie-Antoinette was imprisoned. The princess had successfully escaped revolutionary France and reached the safety of England, but loyally returned to Paris to assist Marie-Antoinette.



No revolutionary authority tried to stop these massacres. The Legislative Assembly did not have the power and the Paris Commune remained silent. People hesitated to call out the National Guard, fearing another massacre. No historian can justify the terrible brutality of the September massacres, but we can perhaps try to understand the forces that drove them. Wars are situations of extreme stress, especially in defeat. Crowd violence is often an expression of fear, not simply of brutishness.

ANALYSIS ACTIVITY 12.1: READING A PRIMARY SOURCE



The horrors of the September massacres

The Parisian novelist and chronicler Restif de la Bretonne wrote:

*Finally, I saw a woman appear, pale as her underclothing, held up by a counter clerk. They said to her in a harsh voice: 'Cry out: Long live the nation!' – 'No! No!', she said. They made her climb up on a heap of corpses ... They told her again to cry out 'Long live the nation!' She refused disdainfully. Then a killer seized her, tore off her dress and cut open her belly. She fell, and was finished off by the others. Never had such horror offered itself to my imagination. I tried to flee, my legs failed, I fainted.*

**Source 12.22** Quoted in Peter McPhee, *The French Revolution, 1789–1799*, 2002, p. 98

- 1 What was the significance or meaning of the crowd's demand to the victim?
- 2 Why do you think the woman refused to make a statement in favour of the nation?

## The turning of the tide in the war

Late in 1792, the military situation improved for France. In the Battle of Valmy on 20 September 1792, the Prussian army was devastated by an outbreak of disease and retreated to the frontier. At the Battle of Jemappes on 6 November 1792, the French army defeated the Austrians and captured most of Belgium. This was followed by a declaration of war on England, Holland and Spain in early 1793.



▲ **Source 12.23** This panoramic painting of the Battle of Valmy was created in 1826 by the French military expert Horace Vernet.

### THE STORY SO FAR

By the end of 1792, it was clear that the international war was not unifying the revolution as the Brissotins had hoped, but was radicalising it. In particular, the popular movement had proved to be far more militant and independent than anybody had thought possible. From the overthrow of the monarchy on 10 August 1792 onwards, there was a complete change in the balance of power. There was still a Legislative Assembly passing laws, but it now did so only with the approval and support of the popular movement.





## Develop your historical-thinking skills

### Using historical terms meaningfully

Write an extended paragraph analysing the internal and external challenges facing the new Legislative Assembly in 1791–92. Which individuals and groups within France were posing the greatest challenges? Which individuals and groups within France began to look to international war as a solution to these challenges? Use the following phrases and terms to show you understand their meaning and context:

- Legislative Assembly
- refractory priests
- emigrated nobles
- Jacobin Club
- Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette
- royal veto
- Brissotins
- Rolandists
- Girondins
- Battle of Lille
- National Guard
- the revolutionary upheaval of 20 June 1792.

### Analysing cause and consequence

Using four or five main points, explain why the experience of international war worked to radicalise the revolution after 1792.

### Constructing historical arguments

‘The real force causing revolutionary violence was not brutality, but fear.’ To what extent do you agree that this was true of the revolution in 1792–94?

## Analysing historian's interpretations

### J.M. Roberts (1928–2003)

In 1991, historian J.M. Roberts wrote:

*On both French and European history, the impact of the Legislative [Assembly] was colossal, but also indirect. It was made by taking France to war at the beginning of 1792. No single decision so much influenced the course of the revolution at home and abroad. It had not been intended that it do so, but the war changed everything. It was the major determinant of all that followed for nearly a decade ... Yet the war was in large measure a by-product of a long and deepening political crisis which ended in disaster for the Legislative Assembly itself and for the constitution which it set up.*



▲ Source 12.25 J.M. Roberts.

Source 12.24 J.M. Roberts, *The French Revolution*, 1991, p. 44

- 1 According to Roberts, what was the most important decision the Legislative Assembly made in 1792?
- 2 From your own knowledge of events in 1791–92, was the war caused mainly by political problems within France at this time? If so, what were they and how would international war solve them?

## Using quotes as evidence

Write a sentence using a short phrase from one of the quotes below or contrast the views from a few of the quotes. You can also use any of the quotes in the chapter. Any quotes you choose can be used directly or paraphrased into your own words.

*The war of defence and ideology preached by the Girondins undeniably worked its charms upon the revolutionary imagination, and its aura outshone any image of the disaster it would invoke.*

**Georges Lefebvre, historian**

*War was the third great polarizing issue of the revolution ... It identified the defeat or the survival of the revolution with that of the Nation itself, so that critics [of the revolution] could plausibly be stigmatised as traitors.*

**William Doyle, historian**

*The war ... overshadowed all the other aims of the revolution and became the principal objective of the state.*

**Alan Forrest, historian**

*By early 1792, such was the combination of anxiety, exhilaration and fear pervading the [Legislative] Assembly that most deputies convinced themselves that the rulers of Austria and Prussia ... were engaged in naked aggression toward the revolution.*

**Peter McPhee, historian**



# 13

## CREATING THE NEW SOCIETY, 1792–94

*[The French Revolution] transformed life, not only for the activists trying to channel it in directions of their own choosing but for ordinary persons going about their daily business.*

– ROBERT DARNTON, 1990

## Overview

The second campaign to create the new order in France was undertaken between 1792 and 1794, and represented a more radical attempt to create a new type of society and a new type of citizen. Robespierre and his fellow Jacobins believed that it was not enough simply to create the political structures of a republic: they had to make people good republicans.

What sort of society did the revolutionaries of 1792–94 hope to create? To answer this, we should analyse a range of evidence prior to constructing an argument about the new society created by the revolution. In the section that follows, we shall examine the Jacobins' plans for society as they were stated formally in the Constitution of 1793 (a new constitution), and also examine how they tried to change everyday life and consciousness.



Historians also analyse resistance to reform. The creation of the new society involves first imagining a 'blueprint' of the new order, then implementing it; however, the process is not always smooth. We must consider how the revolutionaries responded to these challenges and decide whether these responses were suitable. In particular, the second stage of the revolution, and the Terror, have provoked debate. The violence used in the Terror was completely legal, insofar as it was approved by the National Convention and applied by special parliamentary committees.

## Key issues

- What was the nature of the new political team in the National Convention?
- How did Louis XVI meet his end?
- What was the blueprint for the new society?
- How were the structures of everyday life changed?
- What was the Jacobin vision of the new virtuous citizen?

## Digital resources for this chapter

In the *Interactive Textbook*:

-  video and audio sources and questions
-  digital activities.

◀ **Source 13.0** *Freedom or Death*, c. 1794–95 by Jean Baptiste Regnault. In the centre is the genius of France, on the right is Death and on the left is Freedom, holding a Phrygian cap and the 'level of equality'.

# Flow of chapter



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# Chapter timeline

**21 SEPTEMBER 1792**

*France's third national assembly, the National Convention, meets*



**MAY TO JUNE 1792**

*A Jacobin committee formulates the constitution*



**21 JANUARY 1793**

*Execution of Louis XVI*



**17 JULY 1793**

*All remaining feudal dues abolished*

**22 SEPTEMBER 1792**

*France is proclaimed a republic*



**3-26 DECEMBER 1792**

*Trial of Louis XVI*

**10 JUNE 1793**

*Sale of emigrated nobles' land in small strips affordable by poorer peasants*

**10 OCTOBER 1793**

*Constitution placed on hold*



## 13.1 The new political team: The National Convention

Once the king was deposed, the Constitution of 1791 was unworkable; a new assembly must design a new constitution. Borrowing a term from the American Revolution ('convention'), the revolutionaries called their third National Assembly the National Convention.

When the National Convention met on 21 September 1792, it comprised 750 members elected by universal male suffrage. Socially, this third political 'team' was still dominated by the middle classes: some 47 per cent were lawyers and civil servants. A new group – radical writers such as Marat, Brissot and Desmoulin – transformed the nature of political debate with their extremist, accusatory style. This group included some *sans-culottes* (members of the militant working-class movement) and peasants.

Politically, these deputies were all republicans. After 10 August, monarchists and constitutional monarchists disappeared. Many deputies were more democratic than their predecessors, having built their political persona around being, as Marat styled himself, a 'friend of the people', believing vaguely in 'political equality'.

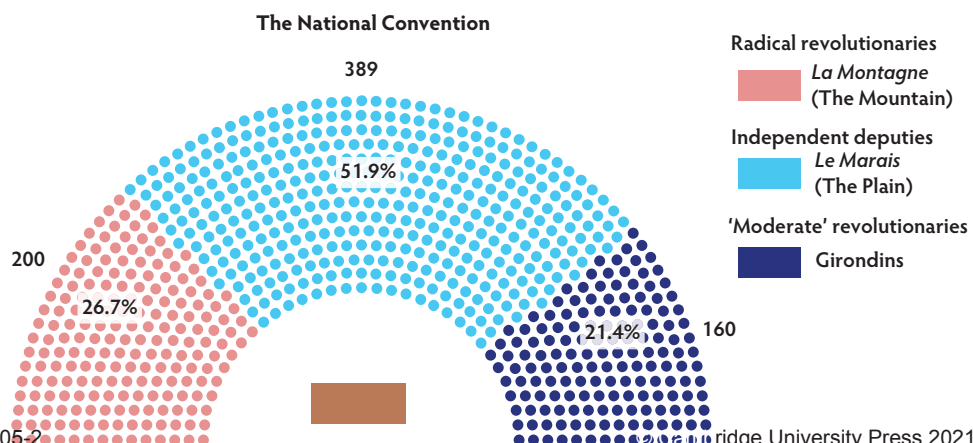
Strategically, the deputies formed voting blocs, not formal parties. On the right were **Girondins**, including Condorcet, Brissot, Roland and Isnard. Initially, these deputies continued to be the governing party. On the left were Jacobin deputies, including Robespierre, Marat, Danton, Desmoulin and Saint-Just.

The elections chose many radical members of the Paris sections to join the National Convention. All 24 members elected for Paris were Jacobins and supporters of the Paris Revolutionary Commune. This radical group was called **the Mountain** (*la Montagne*) because its members sat up in the higher seats of the assembly; they were also referred to as 'the left', because they sat to the left of the speaker's chair.

Between the Girondins and the Mountain was the uncommitted majority, referred to as **the Plain** (*le Marais*); they sat lower down in the assembly and mid-way between the two other groups. The Plain included moderate revolutionaries such as Barère, Sieyès and Grégoire.

The National Convention ultimately divided almost equally into three groups of about 250 members. This third parliament officially abolished the monarchy and proclaimed France a republic.

▼ **Source 13.1** Election results of the National Convention, adapted from Roger Dupuy's *La République Jacobine: Terreur, Guerre et Gouvernement Révolutionnaire (1792–1794)*, 2005. By the time the National Convention met in September 1792, the political spectrum had narrowed, excluding monarchists and constitutional monarchists. The two main groups, the Mountain (the Jacobins) and Girondins, were divided more by a struggle for power than by neatly opposed policies.



**sans-culottes** a general name for the militant working-class movement during the revolution; originally meant someone who didn't wear stylish clothing (*cullottes*)

**Girondins** a loose grouping of deputies around leaders such as Monsieur and Madame Roland, who competed with the Jacobins for control of the National Convention

**the Mountain (*la Montagne*)** referred to as such because they (the Jacobins) sat up in the higher seats of the National Convention

**the Plain (*le Marais*)**, or the uncommitted majority, referred to as such because they sat lower down in the National Convention and mid-way between the two other groups



## 13.2 The struggle over the punishment of the king

Two great challenges awaited the National Convention. The first was a basic power struggle between the Girondins and Jacobins. Despite some excellent scholarship by Melbourne historian Alison Patrick, this competition remains largely mysterious, as historians argue whether it was a political or party-based struggle, or a class-based contest. While no formal parties existed, the Jacobins were certainly most like an organised party, and were able to develop their tactics in the Jacobin Club before going to the assembly. The Girondins, by contrast, were a loose association of small factional groups and – despite Jacobin propaganda – did not form a party and certainly not a conspiracy.



▲ **Source 13.2** This image is a representation of the scene in the National Convention during the trial of Louis XVI.

The second great challenge facing the newly created National Convention was the decision about the fate of the king, and this became the focus of the broader power struggle. In general, the members of the Jacobin Club and the Jacobin deputies in the National Convention demanded the trial and punishment of the king, while the Girondins resisted it.

In December, the National Convention charged Louis XVI with treason, appointing itself as the court. The decision on the king's guilt was rapid; the trial began on 3 December and the king's defence was made on 26 December 1792, but by 7 January 1793, the verdict was that 'citizen Louis Capet' was guilty of conspiracy against public liberty.

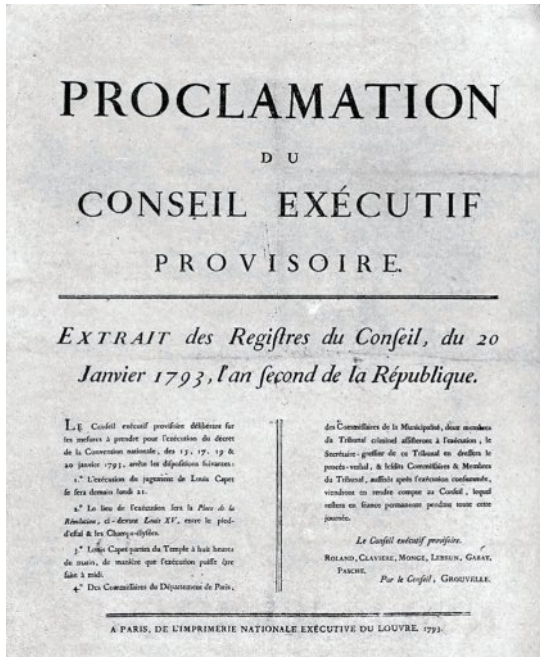
### FOCUS QUESTIONS 13.1

- 1 What was the political and social make-up of the National Convention – France's third National Assembly?
- 2 Why would this assembly become a political battleground for the main revolutionary groups?



The critical issue was his punishment. Should he be imprisoned, exiled or executed? Over 16–17 January 1793, the National Convention narrowly passed a decree for his execution (387 in favour, 334 against) and later voted against a reprieve. He was executed on 21 January 1793.

▼ **Source 13.3** *Left:* The official execution order for Louis XVI. *Right:* This engraving shows the head of Louis XVI being held up as a defiant warning to ‘other crowned heads of Europe’.



# 13.3

## SIGNIFICANT INDIVIDUAL



### King Louis XVI (his life from 1789 to 1793)

In 1791, a revolutionary artist published a hostile image of Louis XVI, showing him as the two-faced king. One of his faces is turned to a deputy of the National Assembly, and a caption states ‘I will support the constitution’. The other face is turned to a priest and the caption states ‘I will destroy the constitution’. The artist has captured, in a nutshell, the essence of the problem; while promising to support the new system of constitutional monarchy, the king and queen were responsible, by their actions, for destroying the political vision and the principles of the men of 1789, and of plunging the revolution into more radical paths. As far as we know, the artist did not do a similar image of Marie-Antoinette, possibly because she did not even pretend to accept the revolution and was open in her contempt for it.

► **Source 13.4** This engraving expresses the radicals’ criticism of the king; he is seen as two-faced, turning to the Third Estate (*left*) and promising to uphold the constitution, but also turning to a refractory priest (*right*) and promising to destroy it.





### Timeline of Louis XVI from October 1789

**October 1789** The women's march and the king's forced return to Paris

**21–22 June 1791** Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette's failed flight to Varennes

**September 1791** Louis XVI signs the Constitution of 1791

**10 August 1792** The storming of the Tuileries Palace – the monarchy is overthrown

**3–26 December 1792** Trial of Louis XVI

**7 January 1793** Condemnation of Louis XVI

**21 January 1793** Execution of Louis XVI



▲ **Source 13.5** The painting on the left shows Louis XVI at the height of his power in 1776, while the painting on the right shows him as a devastated man in 1793, reduced to the name 'citizen Capet', in prison and awaiting his execution at the guillotine.

## 13.4 Creating the new society: The blueprint

The Jacobin Constitution of 1793, which established a republic, was more radical than that of the Constitution of 1791, and any French constitution since.

### Ideas: The people as the source of sovereignty

The key principle was that 'the people' were the source of sovereignty; that is, final authority. Under the old regime, the king was the source of sovereignty, bestowed directly by God. Under the Constitution of 1791, sovereignty came from 'the nation', but not everybody could vote. Now, the term 'the people' referred literally to the population of 28 million people.

## The principles of 1789: Liberty, equality and property

This new constitution retained the fundamental principles of 1791, such as equality before the law, the recognition of merit, freedom of thought and worship, and the basis of laws, arrest, trial and punishment. Although the *sans-culottes* clamoured for government direction of the economy and the radicals demanded a socialistic redistribution of property, the Jacobins insisted that property was sacred. In Article 2, property was declared a fundamental human right; this was repeated in Articles 16 and 19. However sympathetic the Jacobins were to working people, they were still property owners and thus defended property rights.

## Ideas: The right to insurrection

The most radical new idea was the recognition, in Articles 32–35, of the ‘right to insurrection’; that is, the right of working people to put direct pressure on the National Convention to recognise their needs. This was a formal, constitutional recognition that the popular movement’s practice of direct democracy was justified when a government was oppressive.

## Document study: Constitution of 1793

Below is an extract of some of the articles in the Constitution of 1793.

*Article 4: Law is the free and solemn expression of the general will ...*

*Article 5: All citizens are equally admissible to public office.*

*Article 6: Liberty is the power appertaining to a man to do whatever is not injurious to the rights of others.*

*Article 27: Let any individual who would usurp [take over] sovereignty be put to death instantly by free men.*

*Article 35: When the government violates the rights of the people, insurrection is for the people, and for every portion thereof, the most sacred or rights and the most indispensable of duties.*



▲ Source 13.6 The National Convention celebrates the Constitution of 1793



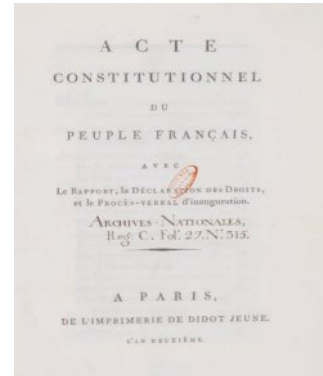
## The optimistic belief that a balance of power is not necessary

The Constitution of 1793 did not seek a balance of power by having an upper and lower house. In creating a single-house legislature, the Jacobins believed that legislation should so obviously be for the common good that every class would support it, **transcending** sectional interests.

**transcend** go beyond a limit or range

## The Constitution of 1793 and real social reform

The Constitution of 1793 offered social reforms. For example, on 3 June 1793, the sale of confiscated noble lands occurred in small lots, so that working people could afford to buy strips, and common land in villages was divided out equally on 10 June 1793. Also, the remaining feudal dues were abolished without compensation on 17 July 1793. These measures were made to demonstrate that a Paris-based revolution could still produce benefits for peasants in the provinces.



## Democracy on hold?

The Jacobins almost immediately suspended the Constitution of 1793. This was not done cleanly or legally.

► **Source 13.7** This is the text of the most radical French constitution, which was never implemented.

On 11 August, Robespierre stated – in the Jacobin Club, not at an assembly – that the constitution could not be implemented immediately. The postponement was not legalised until 10 October, when the National Convention declared that the government was revolutionary until peace was won, so the Constitution of 1793 was suspended.

### FOCUS QUESTIONS 13.2

- 1 What were the main principles of the Constitution of 1793?
- 2 What features made this constitution the most democratic one that France had ever had?

# 13.5 The new society: The structures of everyday life

### KEY HISTORIAN

#### Robert Darnton (1939–)

Cultural historian Robert Darnton argues in his book *The Kiss of Lamourette* (1990) that the revolutionaries aimed to transform the very fabric of life and create a new type of citizen. He believes that the revolution's driving force was actually energy, not violence. The revolution was an unceasing project of change. It began mainly as a political and administrative reform, but by a quantum leap of the imagination went on to imagine the world in a different shape. He sees the deepest level of revolutionary change as psychological change, and concludes that while not everybody participated in the revolution, everybody in France was touched by it in some way.



## The reorganisation of time

The Jacobins introduced a reorganisation of time; the most basic structure by which we understand and structure reality. Their decree to create a new framework of time reveals a gentler, almost lyrical side of their ideology. The old measurements of time were based on Christian terminology, and were scattered with all sorts of archaic holidays related to the monarchy and the old regime. The Jacobins now swept everything away, rewinding the clock to the fall of the monarchy, which they dated Year 1. When the French overthrew the monarchy, they began a new era, so time itself restarted.

The months of the year were beautifully named after natural phenomena – this was the influence of Rousseau’s cult of nature – so that the month of grape harvest became Vendémiaire, the foggy month became Brumaire, the month of frost became Frimaire, Germinal was the month in which plants germinated and Floréal was the month in which flowers bloom.

If beauty provided one basis for the new world, reason provided another. Weights and measures were chaotic under the old regime; the Jacobins introduced the metric system – the metre and the gram – to all measurements, creating the first uniform national system of measures in France.

▼ **Source 13.8** This revolutionary image of the newly named month of ‘Germinal’ (the growing month) shows that Jacobin culture had a more peaceful and lyrical aspect, apart from political violence.



## 13.6 The new citizen: The republic of virtue

The Jacobins did not intend to change people from the outside. They wanted to change the inner spirit: the psychology and the emotions. The concept they put forward was virtue. During 1793–94, Robespierre developed the idea that the new society would depend upon two counterbalancing qualities: Terror, which eliminated the enemies of the new order; and Virtue, which created its citizens and supporters. He believed that the new citizen, like the classical heroes of the past, would be patriotic, altruistic and self-sacrificing, and able to put the welfare of society before their own.

However, the concept of virtue was not to remain abstract; the new republican citizen would be created by improving the basic unit of society: the family, which shapes the individual. This inspired the law allowing divorce. Other humane laws gave legal and civic status to illegitimate children.

### THE STORY SO FAR

By 1793, France had a new, republican political system. The monarchy had been overthrown and the king was executed. Robespierre was prepared to use Terror to overcome the revolution’s immediate enemies. In the longer term, he would use education and culture to create new types of human beings who, because they were ‘virtuous’, would not resist the revolution.

Use the QR code or visit the Interactive Textbook and watch the video summarising the chapter.





## Develop your historical-thinking skills

### Using historical terms meaningfully

Write an extended paragraph explaining how the patriots began creating a new political and social system in France between 1792 and 1794. What were the new political values expressed in the most radical constitution France has ever had? How did they hope to create a new social world by educating a new breed of virtuous citizens? Use the following phrases and terms to show you understand their meaning and context:

- National Convention
- the Plain
- the Girondins
- the Mountain
- Constitution of 1793
- trial of King Louis XVI
- the right to insurrection
- reorganisation of time
- republic of virtue.

### Establishing historical significance

Briefly describe three important changes made by the Jacobins to create their new society. Explain the significance of one of these in more detail.

### Constructing historical arguments

‘While the first French Revolution successfully created new political and social structures, the second revolution was more ambitious and tried to create a completely new social culture and a new type of human being.’ To what extent is this true of France in the years 1792–94?



## Analysing historian's interpretations

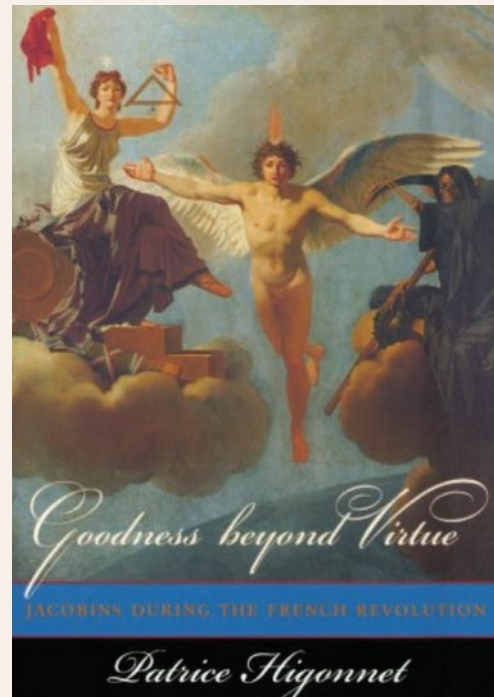
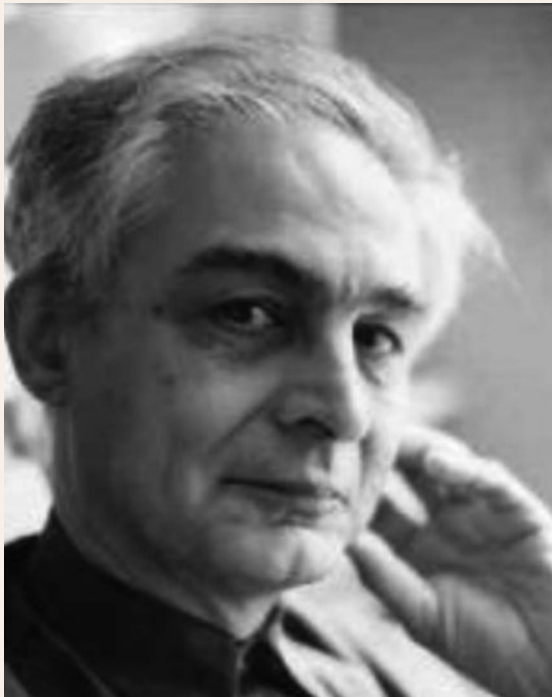
### Patrice Higonnet (1938–)

Historian Patrice Higonnet (1938–) has recently re-evaluated the full scope of the Jacobin plan to regenerate society. He argues that Jacobin culture was made up of two conflicting elements: a broad, generous desire to include all people in an enlightened, humane society and a tendency to exclude 'impure' elements with almost religious fanaticism. Left-wing historians have always tended to praise the first quality, while right-wing historians focus upon the second. Higonnet is perhaps the first historian to acknowledge *both* elements together, and to analyse how they interacted during the rise, and inevitable fall, of Jacobin culture.

*Jacobinism's core belief was that mankind could best realise its true self in the [political] context of a universalist republic. Only in that ideal setting could men and women, as individuals in their own right, fully become what nature and reason wished them to be, namely, the free and active citizens of a harmonious state. [I reject] the idea that the essence of Jacobin politics culminated in the immoral and useless Terror of 1793–94 ... Jacobinism can still be a model for modern democrats. Jacobins were enlightened libertarians who to their own uncomprehending dismay found themselves re-enacting a past of persecution that they desperately wanted to deny.*

**Source 13.9** Patrice Higonnet, *Goodness Beyond Virtue: Jacobins During the French Revolution*, 1998, pp. 1–2

▼ **Source 13.10** Left: Patrice Higonnet. Right: *Goodness Beyond Virtue: Jacobins During The French Revolution*.



- 1 According to Higonnet, why did the Jacobins hold such high hopes for the republic as a political system in France?
- 2 Given that Higonnet admits that the Terror was 'immoral and useless', why does he not criticise the Jacobins more for their role in this aspect of the revolution?
- 3 From your own knowledge of the revolution, explain why the Jacobins can be said to have been 'forced' to use repressive measures?



# 14 THE NEW SOCIETY: CHALLENGES AND RESPONSES, 1792–94

*It was resistance that made the revolution become violent.*

William Doyle, 1989

## Overview

The creation of the new order continued energetically, but met with greater resistance than before. The new society was now being created under the pressure of a complex set of crises.

Times of crisis normally force governments, however democratic, to become more authoritarian to deal effectively with challenges. To study how the French applied more stringent policies of social control, we must explore the Terror and analyse how and why it was introduced. This raises the issue of **revolutionary violence**: the use of intimidation, physical violence and execution to deal with people who oppose the revolution. This is the most misunderstood aspect of the French Revolution; the use of revolutionary violence bears little resemblance to what is usually shown in popular depictions. However, Terror is troubling in political terms, because the revolution turned upon itself and destroyed its own people. In moral terms, too, the human suffering and the loss of life were real and tragic.



**revolutionary violence** the use of intimidation, physical violence and execution to deal with people who opposed the revolution

## Key issues

- What caused the crisis in revolutionary finances?
- What was the nature of the military challenge of international war?
- What caused the food crisis of the revolution?
- What were the causes of the civil war in the Vendée?
- What were the nature and effects of the Federalist revolt?
- What was the psychological impact of political assassinations in Paris?
- How successful were the responses of 'revolutionary government' and Terror?
- What was the Great Terror?

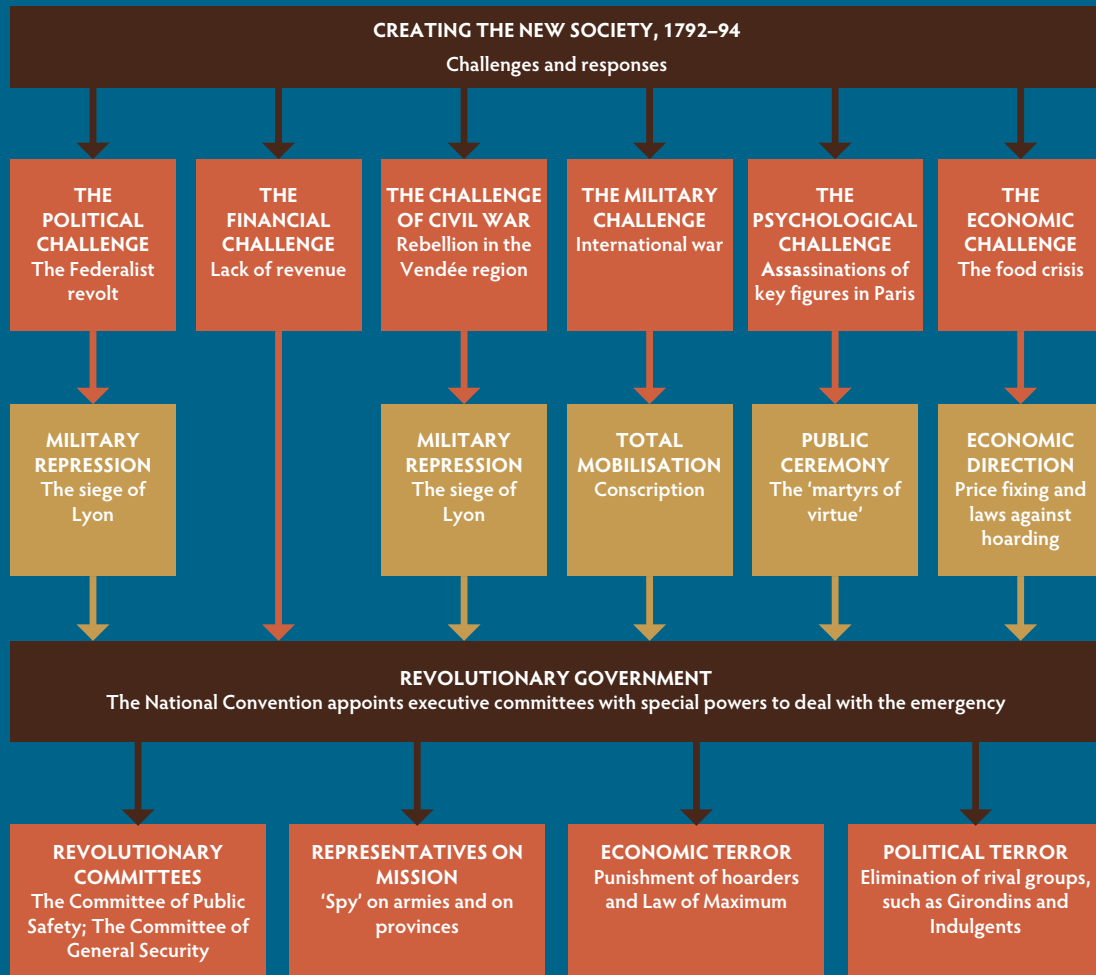
## Digital resources for this chapter

In the *Interactive Textbook*:

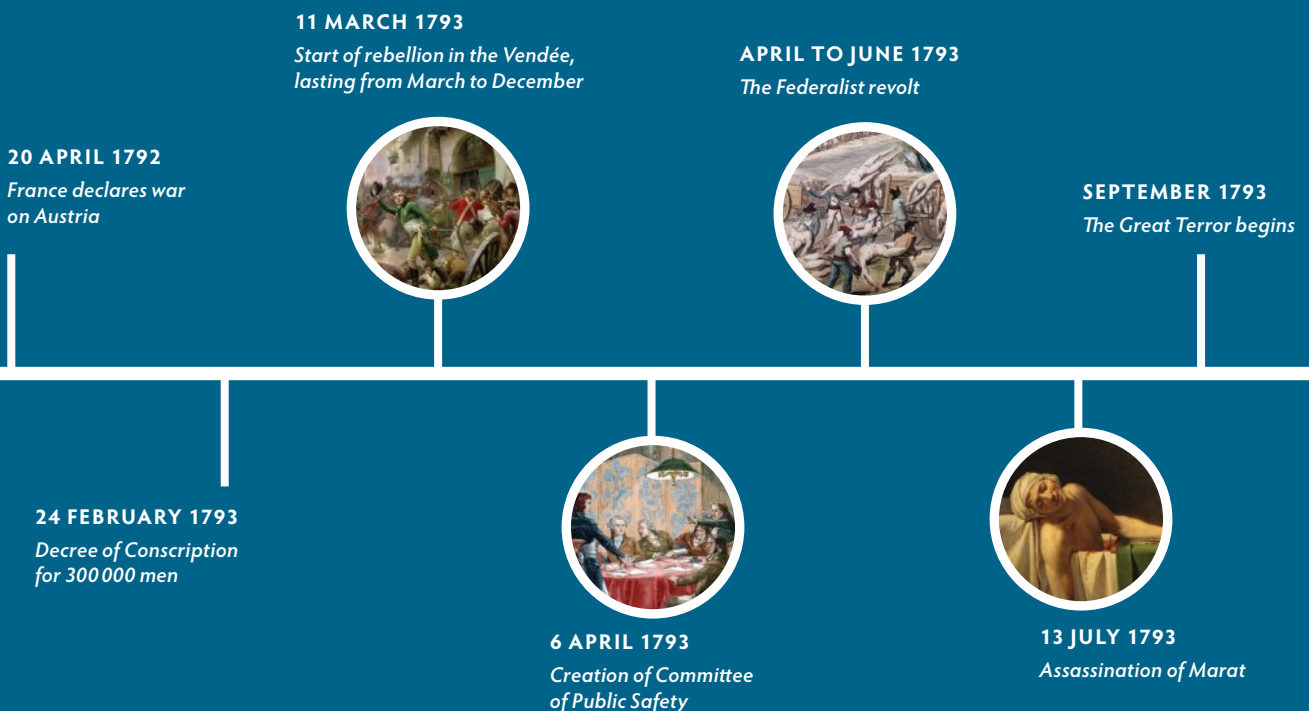
-  video and audio sources and questions
-  digital activities.

◀ **Source 14.0** *The Call for the Last Victims of the Terror, 7–9 Thermidor, Year 2 (25–27 July 1794)* by Charles Louis Lucien Müller

# Flow of chapter



# Chapter timeline



## 14.1 The financial challenge: The crisis in revolutionary finances

The first problem facing the revolution was, ironically, financial; this revolution, which started over the issue of the nation's debt and bankruptcy, and the principle of the accountability of finances, became an ongoing financial crisis.

The revolutionaries forgot that when society is disrupted, people stop paying taxes. The National Assembly had decreed that people must continue paying the old taxes until new ones were applied, but by late 1792 only 50 per cent of taxes were paid and revenues plummeted.

### Responses: Revolutionary bonds

The system created to finance the revolution was theoretically effective; the National Assembly were expecting a national debt of £80 million, so church lands were sold and the money gained was used to issue government bonds (*assignats*) to the value of £400 million, carrying 5 per cent interest.

**assignats**  
government bonds

It could have worked, but the National Assembly was financially naïve. When revenues from taxes dropped and government spending increased, leaving a massive debt, the National Assembly made the classic mistake of issuing more bonds to compensate. The *assignat* developed from a government bond to become paper money, and fell 20 per cent in value between June 1791 and March 1792. Prices soared. In early 1793, the *assignat's* value dropped to 51 per cent of its worth and bondholders panicked. People hoarded metal coins, causing a shortage of hard currency.

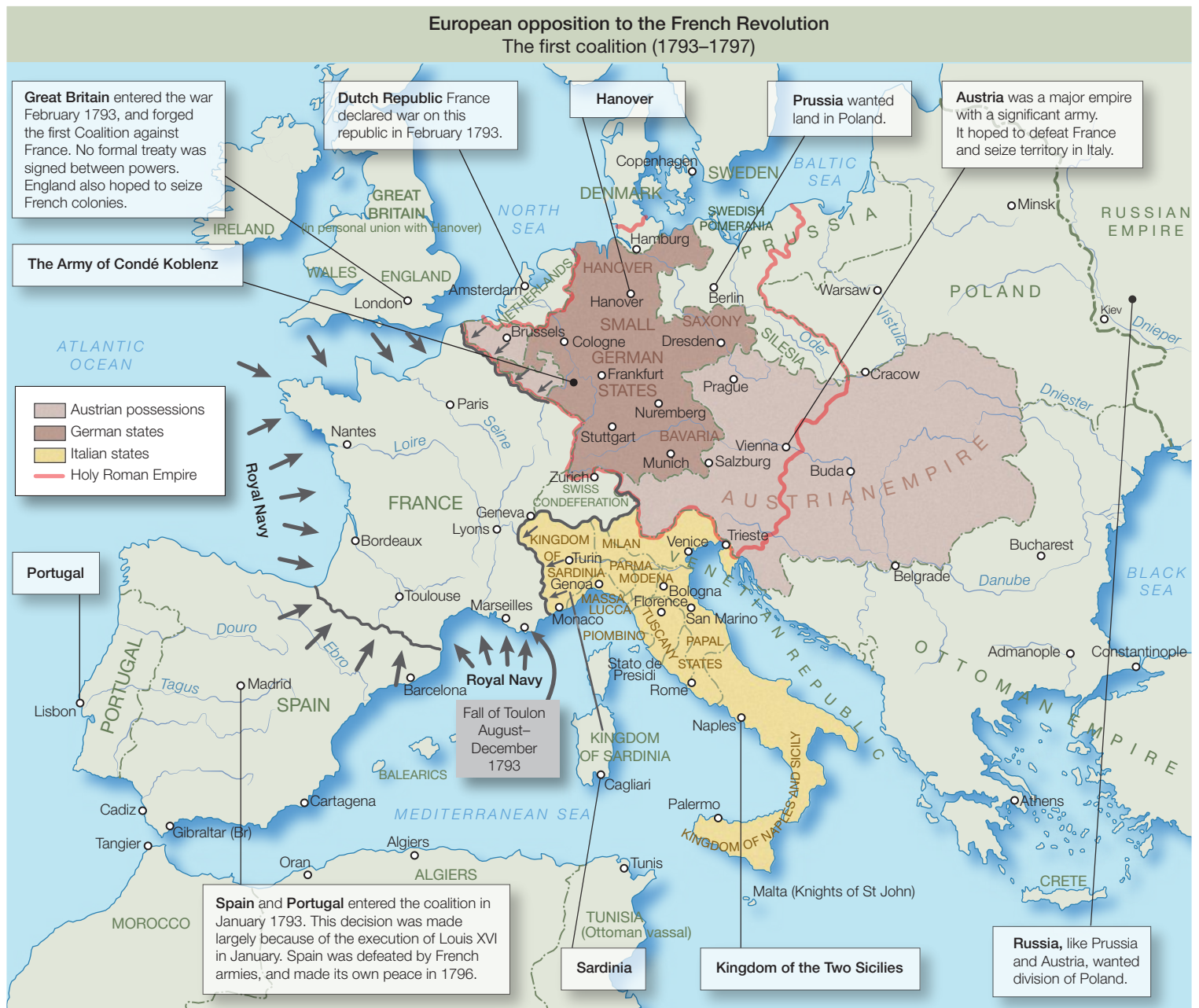
 **KEY STATISTIC**



▲ **Source 14.1** *Assignats* began their life as government bonds and were backed by the value of nationalised property. However, when they began to be used as bank notes and were overprinted, inflation resulted and their value fell.

## 14.2 The military challenge: International war

During the winter of 1792–93, the military situation improved. The September massacres reassured Parisian workers, who volunteered in their thousands and went to the front. At the Battle of Valmy on 20 September 1792, shocked Prussian generals watched as the new French citizen army, led by General Dumouriez, devastated the Prussian forces. The French had more soldiers and better cannon, but these soldiers, straight from the Parisian revolutionary meetings, surged into battle with fire and spirit, singing revolutionary songs. The German poet Goethe, who was invited to witness a Prussian victory, commented quietly to the generals, ‘Here and today, a new era in world history has begun, and you can be proud that you were here to see it born.’ The Prussians prepared to surrender.



▲ **Source 14.2** This map shows the array of powers that formed the overwhelming First Coalition against revolutionary France.



War flared up again after the execution of Louis XVI in January 1793, with France fighting the **First Coalition**, an alliance formed by England that included Russia, Austro-Hungary and Spain, in March and April of 1793. France again suffered defeats. In April 1793, the hero of Valmy, General Dumouriez, sought an armistice with the Austrians, offering to crush the revolution, free the royal family and place the Dauphin on the throne as Louis XVII. His army rebelled so he defected to the Austrians. By July 1793, enemy armies again entered France on almost every border.

**First Coalition** an alliance formed by England that included Russia, Austro-Hungary and Spain

◀ Source 14.3 General Charles-François Dumouriez

## Responses: Total mobilisation

The situation seemed hopeless. The French fought on, slowly regaining ground. They conscripted 300 000 new troops and declared a total war emergency. By 1794, France had an army of 1.5 million men in the field. This concept of total war was not invented by the National Convention, but by the radical working-class movement of the Paris section meetings. Every citizen now had some duty; for example, veterans were urged to sit in public squares and fire young people's minds with heroic stories to arouse hatred of kings and love of republics.



◀ Source 14.4 This painting by Lesueur represents some of the officers and men who formed France's early revolutionary army.



◀ Source 14.5 This painting by Lesueur represents three examples of how all citizens tried to play a role in the war effort. A young woman promises to marry her fiancé even if he comes back wounded from the war; citizens bring sheets and shirts to make bandages for the troops; and two men report for duty with a cannon.

## 14.3 The economic challenge: The food crisis

The war drew heavily upon France's food supplies and disrupted its international trade. All basic commodities, including sugar, coffee, soap and candles, were in short supply and prices were tripling. By January 1793, food riots again occurred in Paris. In February, the radical section meetings of Paris condemned free trade, which middle-class deputies in the National Convention supported.

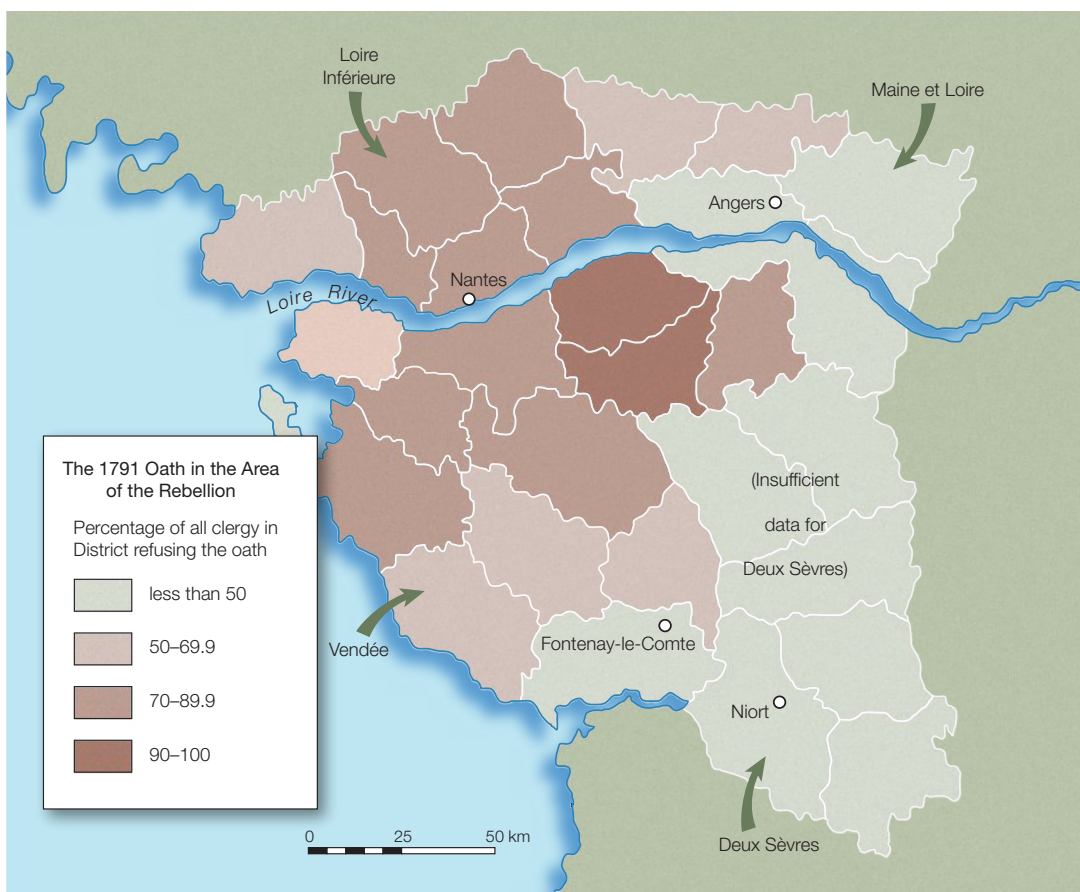
The popular movement petitioned both the Jacobin Club and the National Convention for government regulation of prices. When the National Convention refused, the *sans-culottes*, encouraged by the radical

**enraged ones (*les enragés*)** an ultra-radical group produced by the *sans-culottes*

group called the **enraged ones (*les enragés*)**, responded with the practice of 'popular taxation' on 25–26 February 1793. It was not looting; crowds, led by women, broke open shops, declared what they thought a fair price for the goods – usually the 1790 price – and sold them at that price, then handed the money to the terrified shopkeeper.

## 14.4 The military crisis: Civil war in the Vendée region

France's international problems were compounded by the outbreak of civil war. The trouble began in the Vendée region in the south-west of France. This civil war embarrassed the revolutionaries because it denied the revolution's central purpose. How can a revolution claim to be improving the world for the people when thousands are actively resisting it?



▲ **Source 14.6** This map shows the large number of priests who refused the clerical oath in the Vendée region; in several areas, 70–100 per cent of priests did so.



It is important to understand just how complex the causes of rebellion can be. In popular myth, this was a rebellion of loyal peasants who loved their king and the Catholic Church, and who stood up against the revolution that had destroyed both. In reality, these peasants had simply decided that they were worse off under the revolution.

The first cause of the rebellion was the reintroduction of conscription by ballot. Since the bourgeois of the towns were excused because they served in the National Guard, the conscription took mainly peasants, who resented leaving their farms. Behind this grievance was a more basic division between town and country, bourgeois and peasant. The peasants could not afford to buy Church land and resented the bourgeoisie, who bought large amounts.

Second, the reorganisation of the Church caused the closure of locally loved churches and the issue of the clerical oath caused a massive 90 per cent rate of refusal in the Vendée. The area lost most of its priests and the locals hated the replacement 'revolutionary' priests.

Isolated peasant skirmishes became broad peasant resistance. The peasant army stormed towns and took over whole parts of the region. When the Jacobins sent revolutionary armies to repress the rebellion, they found themselves fighting guerrilla warfare in a landscape divided by thick hedges. The rebels formed the Catholic and Royal Army and demanded the return of their king, their former priests and the death of all revolutionaries. They planned to seize a French port to open the way for a British invasion.

By March 1793, the National Convention was facing major insurrection. The response was firm: republican armies were sent to the region to repress the rebellion utterly. The Vendée rebellion is remembered for the extremely cruel atrocities committed by both the revolutionaries and the rebels, creating a bitter legacy of hatred that survives to this day.



◀ **Source 14.7** *Henri de La Rochejaquelein fighting at Cholet, 17 Octobre 1793*, by Paul-Émile Boutigny. La Rochejaquelein was a young general of the Vendée rebellion, pictured here in a green coat. He died at the age of 21 in 1794, fighting against the republicans.

## 14.5 The ideological challenge: The counter-revolution

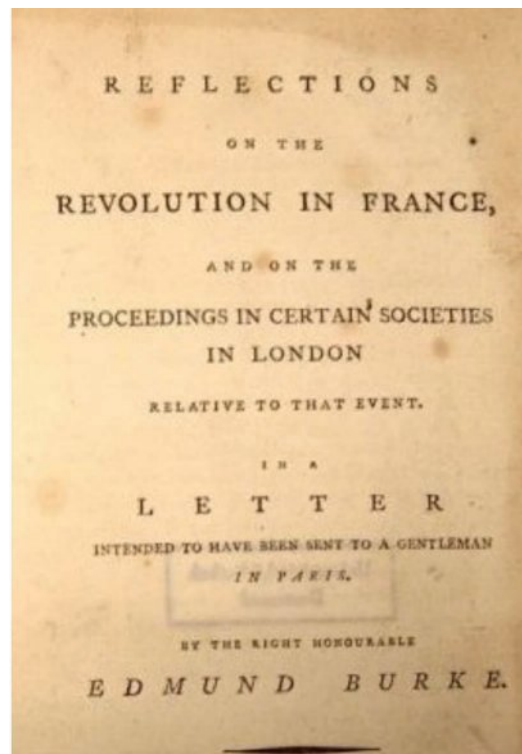
**counter-revolution**  
any movement  
aiming to oppose the  
revolution

A **counter-revolution** is any movement, group or idea that aims to obstruct and reverse reforms being made by a new revolutionary regime. In one sense, this began immediately in 1789: certain members of the nobility and the clergy opposed the massive reforms of the Constituent Assembly, mainly because these people lost prestige, influence and money. At this stage, it was an automatic, reflexive response to protect self-interest.

### Edmund Burke and the theory of counter-revolution

As an ideology, counter-revolution was born in November 1790, when the Anglo-Irish writer and statesman Edmund Burke published his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Burke savagely attacked the French Revolution – not from the point of view of money, but from political theory. He gave the world the now classic counter-revolutionary view that institutions need to be based on tradition and previous practice, and that human beings cannot in one generation redesign something that has worked for centuries.

Burke did not believe that the revolutionary principles of liberty and reason could design a better society. Later counter-revolutionaries, such as de Maistre and de Bonald, added to this idea, stating that religion should be the powerful force guiding society, and argued that human beings *did not* have any universal rights, merely a duty to society.



▲ Source 14.8 Left: Edmund Burke, English philosopher and critic of the French Revolution. Right: The front page of *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.

### The noble emigration

Emigration usually means to leave one's country for another. However, in the context of the French Revolution, it had the added meaning of leaving to gather forces in a friendly country in order to attack France and overthrow the revolution.

This form of emigration built up slowly. The king's brother, the Comte d'Artois, quit France on the day of the capture of the Bastille, but the early stages of the French Revolution were relatively peaceful. Most nobles did not yet feel threatened and decided to stay in France, even if they did not like the new regime.

The atmosphere changed dramatically after the flight to Varennes in June 1791, because the flight caused massive popular anger, increased political radicalism, and generated a heightened sense of hostility and threat towards the nobles. By the winter of 1791–92, the flow of emigrants increased significantly. Some 150 000 people left France; most were nobles and many were officers in the army or navy.

### Counter-revolutionary armies at Koblenz

The German city of Koblenz became a centre for counter-revolutionary armies, or 'armies of the princes' as they were known. The Comte de Mirabeau-Tonnerre (brother of the revolutionary Mirabeau) formed his Black Legion there. The Prince de Condé also formed his own army.

These armies posed *some* military threat to France, insofar as they did go into battle beside Prussian forces when they attacked France in April 1792. However, the Prussian commander, the Duke of Brunswick, did not view them as a reliable military force and kept them well behind his own professional army. Their impact on the revolution was therefore probably more psychological – creating a panicky feeling of enemies – than operational.

Indeed, the Austrians and Prussians blamed the emigrated nobles for not holding the line, resulting in their defeat at the Battle of Valmy. Moreover, the emigrated nobles had promised to stir up a counter-revolutionary uprising in France at the same time as the battle, but failed to do so. In the end, the Duke of Brunswick asked that the emigrated armies be disbanded.



▲ Source 14.9 Depiction of emigrated nobles in Koblenz

## The impact of counter-revolutionary threat

While the counter-revolutionary armies in Koblenz posed some military threat, it was an initiative of a different type that profoundly affected the development of the revolution. All wars generate fear and all defeats tend to generate panic. During the great war emergency of 1792–93, successive defeats led to the very real possibility of the allied armies capturing Paris. On 25 July 1792, the Duke of Brunswick published his long manifesto threatening the people of France.

This threat was, in fact, written at the request of the emigrated nobles and on the order of the Count of Fersen, a counter-revolutionary activist close to Marie-Antoinette, and the architect of her earlier catastrophic flight to Varennes. Historian H.A. Barton explains:

*News of the manifesto reached Paris by 28 July, where it aroused a patriotic furore largely credited with having precipitated the storming of the Tuileries and the overthrow of the monarchy on 10 August 1792.*

**Source 14.10** H.A Barton, *Count Hans Axel Fersen: Aristocrat in an Age of Revolution*, 1975, p. 125

Arguably, therefore, the counter-revolution had achieved the opposite of the goals it had set itself: instead of saving the king, they had sealed his fate. While the flight to Varennes had seriously damaged his credibility, the Brunswick Manifesto was the catalyst for the radical popular movement to depose him. And, instead of helping foreign armies invade France and crush the revolution, the counter-revolutionaries had arguably done the most to inspire the French people to resist heroically and to triumph.

## Legislation against emigrated nobles and counter-revolutionaries

The National Assembly tried to prevent noble emigration from 12 June 1791 by forbidding French citizens to leave the country without a passport. The subsequent Legislative Assembly was even more strict, declaring that any French citizen who communicated with the Prince of Condé was committing treason. They also decreed that any nobles who did not return to France by 1 May 1792 would lose their properties, and any person, emigrated or not, who resisted the new regime would be executed.

## Spies and invasion plots

The counter-revolution used foreign spies to gather information about conditions in France, with the aim of causing a massive popular revolt that would draw French revolutionary armies away from the front at the moment the allies attacked. The Comte d'Artois, for example, sponsored two invasion plans in 1795 to help the English land in western France, but both failed.

► **Source 14.11** The Comte d'Artois, Louis XVI's younger brother, as painted by Henri Pierre Danloux



## Counter-revolution in the Vendée and Normandy regions

Historians debate whether the revolt in the Vendée region was counter-revolutionary or just an expression of dissatisfaction with what people got out of the revolution. Historian Peter McPhee believes that the revolt in the Vendée was more *anti*-revolutionary (complaining about changes made by the revolution) than *counter*-revolutionary (trying to destroy the revolution). In contrast, France's expert on the counter-revolution, Jacques Godechot, argues that 'the peasant insurrections in western France were the first of this type among the counter-revolutionary insurrections.'

The revolt clearly started as a result of peasant grievances against changes created by the revolution. First, the peasant population was angry because the sale of Catholic Church lands was in big lots that were too expensive for the poorer folk; only rich peasants and bourgeois could buy them. Second, the peasants had always hated conscription into the army, but were now furious to discover that rich bourgeois who were in the National Guard did not have to go into the army. Third, some 90 per cent of clergy in the region refused the oath of loyalty and were punished; local people were devastated to lose their beloved local priests.

However, when the peasants formed a ragged army of 10 000 men, women and children, and began conducting guerrilla warfare, the nobles of the counter-revolution saw an opportunity and joined the rebels, giving them military leadership. Now the rebellion became properly counter-revolutionary, because the rebels attempted specifically to capture a port city in the region, with the aim of opening it to allow British ships in with an invasion force. They tried this at ports such as Nantes, Les Sables d'Orlonne and Granville, but failed in each case. In June 1795, the British helped land 4500 counter-revolutionary forces on the Quiberon Peninsula of Brittany, but the region did not rise in rebellion to support them, and the force was surrounded and captured by the republican General Hoche.



▲ Source 14.12 *Landing at Quiberon, July 1795* by Jean Sorieul

## Did the counter-revolution help the revolution?

The noble resistance and counter-revolution had a powerful formative effect on the development of the new society. Ironically, the existence of a real noble conspiracy beyond France's borders, and the predictable threat of a noble return and reintroduction of hierarchy and privilege, helped the formation of the new society in two important ways. First, it gave the Jacobin government a strong rationale for implementing the harsh defensive measures of the Terror. Second, the credible threat of a noble comeback served to win over any bourgeois, workers and peasants who were uncertain of the revolution and to inspire them to defend the new order.

## 14.6 The political challenge: The Federalist revolt

The Federalist revolt created a different sort of challenge to the revolution. Technically, it was not strictly counter-revolutionary, because its members were revolutionaries who supported the republic and the Constitution of 1793. They did not want to stop the revolution but rather acted to protect it from the pressure of direct democracy from the working-class movement in Paris. This was essentially a regional movement, affecting about 60 of France's 83 departments. The main centres of the rebellion against the revolution were Bordeaux, Lyon, Marseille and Toulon.



▲ **Source 14.13** This engraving represents the brutal repression that killed around 2000 Federalist rebels in the city of Lyons. When the guillotine proved too slow as a means of execution, the republican troops loaded cannon with shrapnel and fired point blank at their victims, cutting them to pieces.

The provincial revolutionaries believed in representative democracy and supported the republic. However, they did not understand the political realities of Paris, where the popular movement was all-powerful. Horrified by attacks on the National Convention, such as the upheaval of 31 May to 2 June 1793, the Federalists started a number of rebellions of varying seriousness during 1793. In Lyon, for example, moderate revolutionaries seized local government from more radical Jacobin deputies. They planned to raise an army of 10 000 men, march on Paris, protect the National Convention and crush the popular movement.

The National Convention responded firmly to such challenges. It declared Lyon a rebel city and ordered all inhabitants to leave the town. When the Lyon Federalists resisted, the National Convention sent a revolutionary army to crush the rebellion. In the resulting siege of Lyon, which occurred in October 1793, some 2000 Federalists were executed and the revolutionary government, infuriated by the resistance, initially ordered the city to be flattened. Although many other revolts were crushed relatively easily, they did harm the revolution by taking revolutionary troops away from the war front, increasing the mood of crisis, uncertainty and fear.



▲ Source 14.14 Depiction of the siege of Lyon, October 1793

## 14.7 The psychological challenge: Assassinations in Paris

The general sense of emergency and crisis was sharpened by dramatic events in Paris. First, an assassin murdered the deputy Le Peletier de Saint-Fargeau on 20 January 1793, as punishment for voting for the king's execution. In July, the radical Montagnard Marat was stabbed to death by a supporter of the revolution, Charlotte Corday, who claimed that the revolution had lost its sense of legality and justice. These assassinations, together with an unsuccessful attempt on Robespierre's life, created a paranoia that the revolution was threatened by invisible enemies.



▲ Source 14.15 *Left*: This painting provides a dramatic, but imagined, account of Corday's act of 'principled murder'. *Right*: This painting by Jacques Louis David offered a dramatic image of the dead Marat in his bathtub. The representation was intended to be a sympathetic image of the leader, who was seen as a martyr to the cause of liberty.



**revolutionary government**

temporary emergency measures to deal with the threat to the revolution

In March 1793, all these elements of crisis – war, economic disruption, civil war and popular radicalism – joined to prompt measures that would have horrified the people of 1789. At this point of supreme crisis, when the revolution seemed most threatened, the National Convention adopted the first measures known as **revolutionary government**, which entailed temporary emergency measures to deal with the threat to the revolution.



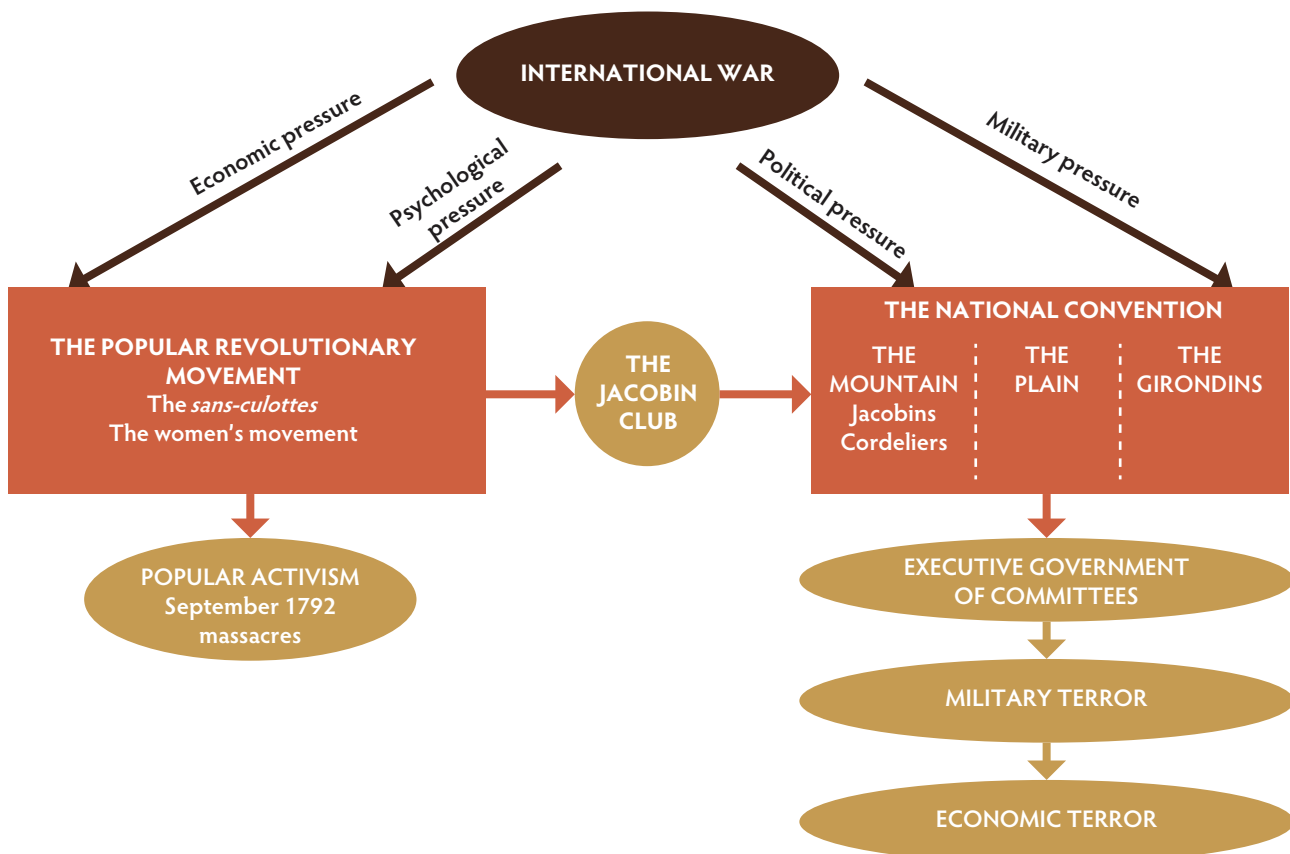
▲ Source 14.16 Left: Charlotte Corday. Right: The skull of Charlotte Corday. Four days after Marat was murdered, Corday was executed by guillotine.

**FOCUS QUESTIONS 14.1**

- 1 What were the challenges facing the revolution in the years 1792–94?
- 2 How did the revolutionaries try to deal with these challenges?

# 14.8 The role of war in radicalising the French Revolution

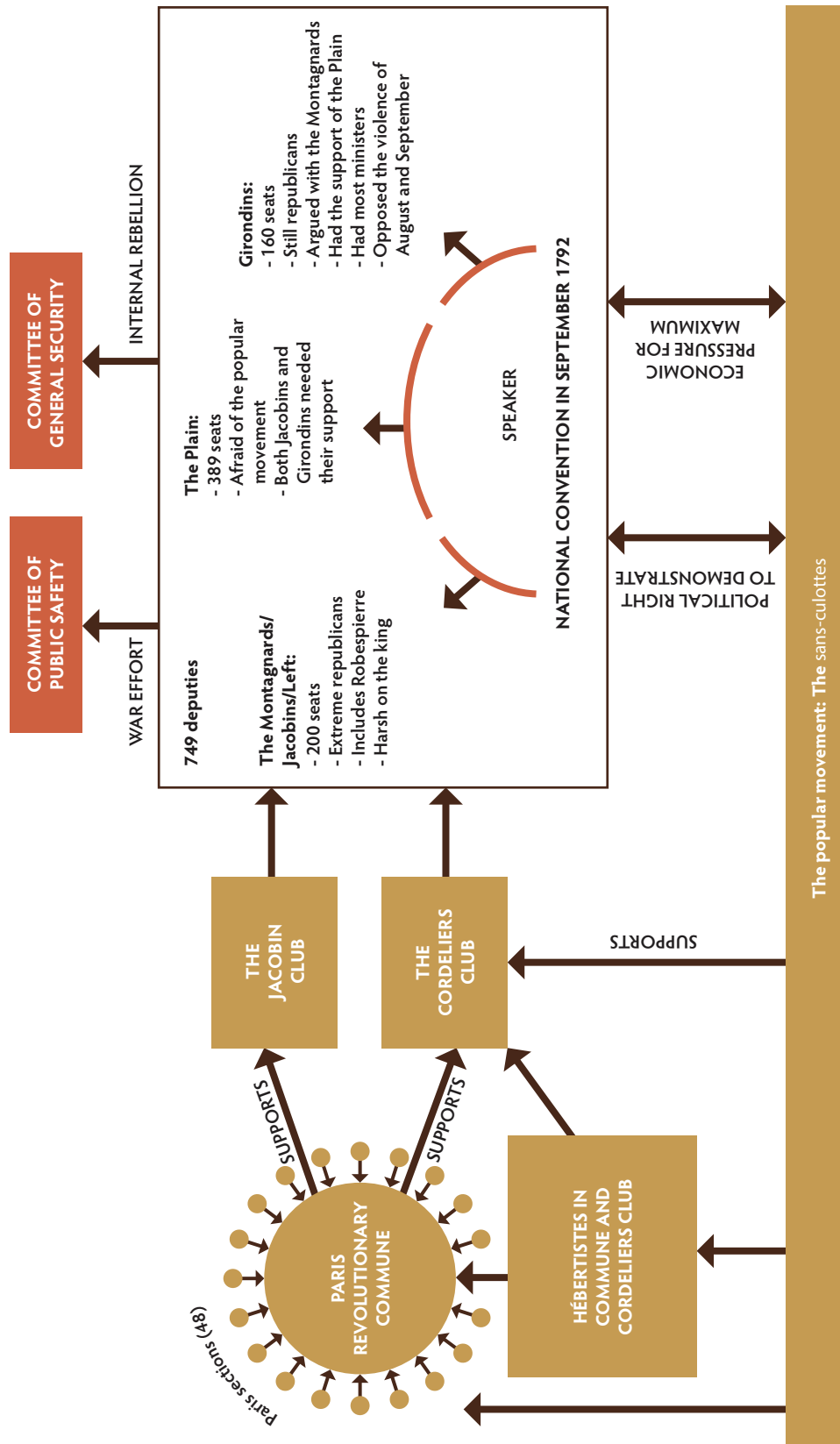
Below is a diagram of the different pressures created from France being at war with Austria and Prussia, and later with Britain and Spain, which served to help radicalise the French Revolution.





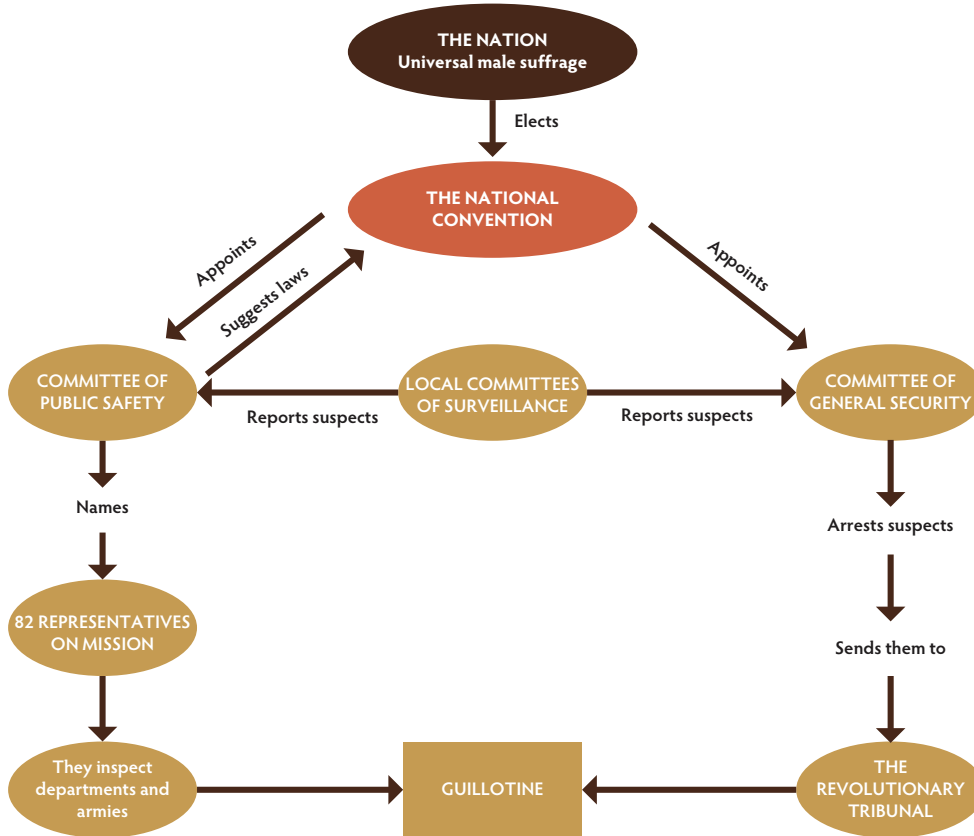
## The political landscape in 1793–94

The diagram below shows the make-up of the National Convention and its pressures and influences during 1793–94.



# 14.9 Revolutionary government and Terror

Below is a flow chart of how the mechanisms of Terror worked during the French Revolution in 1793–94.



## The forms of Terror, 1792–94

There were several forms of Terror in France during 1792–94, which ultimately led to the Great Terror – the worst and final stage. The forms of Terror are shown in the diagram below.

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <p><b>THE INSTITUTIONS OF THE TERROR</b><br/>           The Committee of General Security (1792)<br/>           The Committee of Public Safety (28 March 1793)<br/>           The Law of Suspects (17 September 1793)<br/>           The Law of 14 Frimaire (4 December 1793)</p> | <p><b>THE LOCAL TERROR</b><br/>           The Revolutionary Committees of Surveillance (21 March 1793)</p>   |
| <p><b>THE MILITARY TERROR</b><br/>           The Representatives on Mission (22 September 1792)<br/>           The Revolutionary Tribunal (10 March 1793)</p>   | <p><b>THE FACTIONAL TERROR</b><br/>           The trial and execution of the Girondins (31 May–2 June 1793)<br/>           The trial and execution of the Hébertistes (31–24 March 1794)<br/>           The trial and execution of the Indulgents (5 April 1794)</p> |
| <p><b>THE ECONOMIC TERROR</b><br/>           The Law of the Maximum (4 May 1793)<br/>           The Law Against Hoarding – death penalty (26 July 1793)<br/>           The Law of the General Maximum (29 September 1793)</p>   | <p><b>THE GREAT TERROR</b><br/>           Mass executions, including many leading revolutionary figures</p>  |

## 14.10 The military Terror

### Revolutionary tribunal to try traitors

The popular movement demanded strong measures to win the war. Events followed a familiar pattern: anger, suspicion, paranoia and vengefulness boiled over in the Paris section meetings, which demanded firm action; the Jacobin Club, anxious to please the popular movement, loudly agreed; and then the National Convention quickly passed legislation. For example, the idea of a revolutionary tribunal to try traitors first arose in the Paris sections, was taken up by the Jacobin Club, and then was enacted by the National Convention on 10 March 1793.



▲ **Source 14.17** Madame Roland heads to a revolutionary tribunal. She was executed by guillotine on 8 November 1793, aged 39.

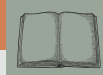
### Representative on mission

The same process – popular movement affecting the National Convention’s decisions – generated the idea of using a ‘representative on mission’ to manage revolts. From March 1793, a total of 82 deputies were sent to each department in France to inform administrators and those in the army why emergency measures were necessary; that is, their official mission was to be informative and coordinate the emergency measures from the revolutionary government. However, the representative on mission was virtually a spy, being responsible for checking that administrators, generals and officers in the provinces were doing their utmost for the revolution.



◀ **Source 14.18** *Left:* This engraving shows the work of the representatives on mission: General Custine was condemned and executed for losing the Rhineland to France's enemies. *Right:* This painting depicts a representative on mission, Jean-Baptiste Milhaud, in full ceremonial uniform.

### ANALYSIS ACTIVITY 14.1: READING A PRIMARY SOURCE



#### Civil war breeds dehumanisation and atrocities on both sides

Below is an official report by Commissaire Benaben who describes the mass killing of rebels in the town of Savenay on 26 December 1793.

*I witnessed all the atrocities that a town taken by force can offer. The soldiers, having spread out into the houses, and having brought out the wives and daughters of the bandits who had not had time to leave and flee, led them into squares and streets, where they were piled up and their throats cut on the spot: with rifle shots, bayonet blows and cuts of the sword.*

**Source 14.19** Claude Petitfrere, *La Vendée et les Vendéens*, 1981

- 1 What techniques were used to kill large numbers of people quickly and conveniently?
- 2 Consider the tone of this report. What does this document reveal about the process of dehumanisation that occurs during a civil war?

## 14.11 The religious Terror: Dechristianisation

### Government policy or popular action?

The violent and destructive popular movement known at the time as 'dechristianisation' was not the result of official government policy or of formal legislation by the National Assembly. Instead, it arose informally and illegally because of radical representatives on mission who provoked the ultra-radical *sans-culottes* movement to take action. The movement was at its strongest between late 1793 and early 1794.

Historian A.F. Aulard writes:

*It was not entirely comparable to the wave of panic engendered by the Great Fear of 1789, which spread much more rapidly and was spontaneous. [Dechristianisation] was neither a panic nor truly spontaneous; on the other hand, it was not imposed from above, since the revolutionary government disavowed it very early, in Frimaire year II. It was, in fact, an organised, collective reaction with a highly politicised attitude.*

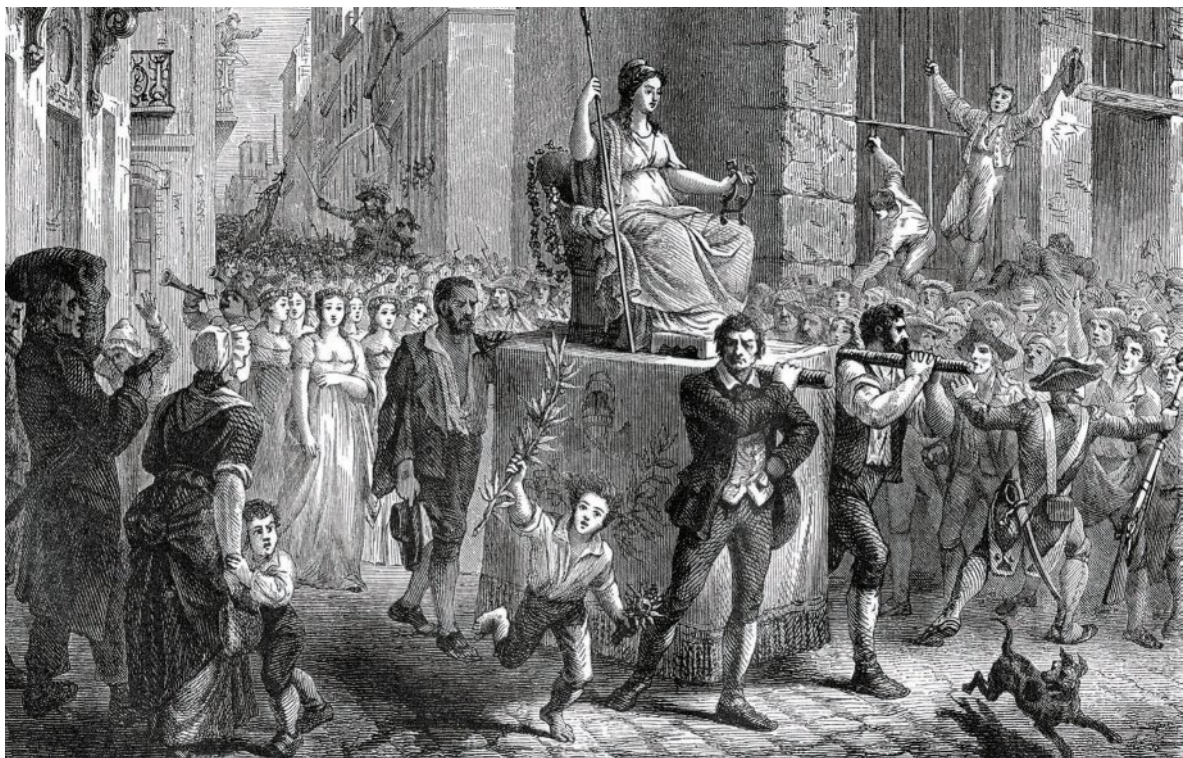
**Source 14.20** F.A. Aulard, in Samuel Scott and Barry Rothaus, *Historical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, volume 1, 1985, p. 299

## The first inspiration for the attack on churches and clergy

The idea for a program of destructive attacks on churches originated from a representative on mission, Joseph Fouché, who had been sent to Nevers in central France. Having previously seen the massive resistance of refractory priests in the Vendée, he concluded that Christianity could never co-exist with the revolution. At Nevers on 22 September 1793, he designed a ceremony – the Feast of Brutus – to urge action against all priests and to create his own secular (non-Catholic) religion. Later, he moved on to the southern city of Lyons.

The idea appealed to the most radical sections of the *sans-culottes* movement, and spread quickly to other regional towns and then to Paris. There the radical Paris Section meetings and the radical political clubs – such as the Hébertistes – took up the idea with ferocious enthusiasm.

Typically, a revolutionary crowd would attack a church, force the juring priest to leave, then break into the treasury, confiscate religious items made of silver or gold, and present them to the National Convention. They then declared that church closed and re-named it a ‘temple of reason’. The crowd also staged revolutionary street theatre, holding processions mocking religious ceremonies, often by wearing sacred costumes. The movement reached its height when the Parisian crowd evicted the Bishop of Paris and held a ‘festival of liberty and reason’ in Notre-Dame Cathedral on 10 November 1793.



▲ **Source 14.21** A depiction of a street procession during the ‘festival of reason’. The seated woman represents the goddess of reason.

Historian William Doyle explains why this movement became so popular with radical crowds:

*Once launched it was eminently democratic. Anybody could join in smashing images, vandalising churches ... and theft of vestments to wear in blasphemous mock ceremonies. Those needing pretexts could preach national necessity when they tore down bells or walked off with plate that could be recast into guns or coinage.*

Source 14.22 William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 1989

Historian Peter McPhee adds that this crowd action must have been a powerful, exhilarating experience – there was massive excitement and participation in processions, such as the figure of a priest being paraded through the town sitting backwards on a donkey (a traditional sign of disapproval and ridicule). Another popular action was pulling down a statue of a saint and giving it a public whipping in the town square.

The National Convention itself ordered the looting of the royal tombs in the Cathedral of Saint-Denis in August 1793. The radical Paris Commune also stepped in and on 23 October 1793 ordered all the statues on the front of Notre-Dame Cathedral to be torn down and smashed.



▲ Source 14.23 This coloured engraving shows the desecration of tombs in the Cathedral of Saint-Denis.

## How did the government react to this anti-religious vandalism?

The violent attacks on churches and priests went far beyond anything the deputies of the National Convention believed in. As men of 1789, they did believe in the Enlightenment critique of organised religion, but they had addressed this legally in their Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, and in the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. As men of 1793, they had suspicions about the role of refractory clergy in the counter-revolution, but this had been addressed legally and officially by the laws of the Terror.

The deputies did not immediately react to this new wave of violence – perhaps because many were quite frightened by the sheer strength of the radical *sans-culottes* movement – but Robespierre and Danton

quickly saw that these attacks on priests and churches would anger people who still followed the Catholic religion – especially women – and they could consequently turn against the revolution. For example, in Brie, angry peasants attacked the Jacobin Club, shouting, ‘Long live the Catholic religion, we want our priests, we want mass on Sundays and holy days!’

The National Convention passed a law declaring any attacks on priests or churches to be illegal. This calmed the situation in Paris, but did not prevent the movement from spreading to other regions of France, where it was much more difficult to control by local authorities. The attacks were still going in the southern part of France as late as April and May 1794.

Fearing the consequences, Robespierre led the National Convention to urgently declare by decree that ‘All violence and measures contrary to liberty of worship are forbidden.’ However, the decree reassured people that actions taken against refractory priests involved in counter-revolution were legitimate. So, this new law did very little to calm the situation.

The National Convention also organised what historian J.H. Stewart has called ‘the somewhat ridiculous atheistic Festival of Reason’ on 10 November 1793. Later, on 7 May 1794, the National Convention further decreed that ‘the French people recognise the supreme being and the immortality of the soul’. This was followed by the ‘Festival of the Supreme Being’ on 8 June 1794.

In essence, Robespierre was using the term ‘Supreme Being’ to reassert religious faith without angering the radicals by using ‘God’. It might be said that Robespierre was trying to counter the very radical popular anti-Christian processions by his own, much larger, official processions and ceremonies.



▲ **Source 14.24** A painting of the Festival of the Supreme Being at the Champ de Mars. The Cult of the Supreme Being was employed to counter both Christianity and the existing cult of reason.

## The peaceful side of dechristianisation

The National Convention did turn its attention to some peaceful ways of reducing the influence of the Catholic Church. One was to eliminate the many place names that referred to a saint of the Christian religion. Also, as mentioned in Chapter 13, time was re-invented. Dates were not to be calculated since the birth of Christ, but from the declaration of the republic in 1792; for example, Year II of Liberty was two years from the declaration of the republic. The National Convention created a decimal calendar, in which years, months and days were given mathematical names. In particular, special days, such as saint’s days or holy days, were neutralised of any religious reference. So, too, were all personal names for men and women. Everywhere, place names and people’s names were stripped of any religious association, and rewritten to express a gentle love of nature or a revolutionary political principle.





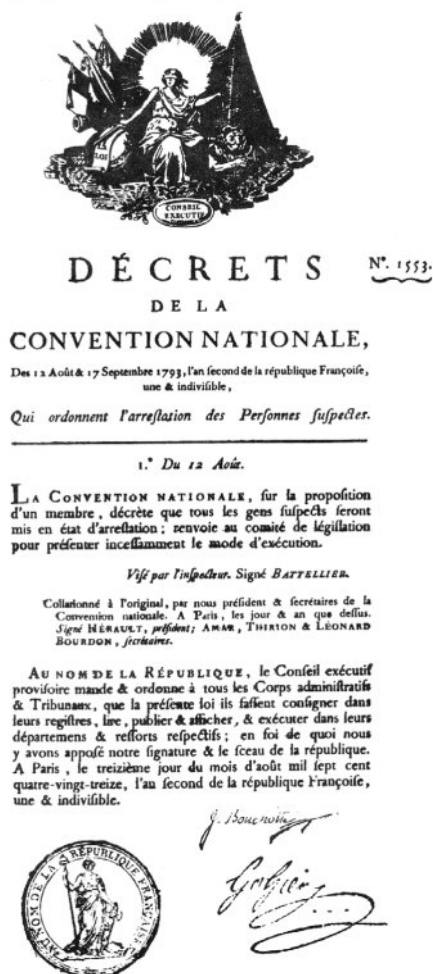
## The Committee of Public Safety

On 28 March 1793, the National Convention established the Committee of Public Safety, comprising 25 members, to command and coordinate the war effort. This emergency body gained executive powers on 6 April 1793 and the number of members was reduced to nine (later 12). At this time, the National Convention also created a Committee of General Security, which was essentially a policing body responsible for locating, arresting and imprisoning traitors. Initially, the Committee of Public Safety was directed by Barère, but it was dominated by Danton in its early days, who preached reconciliation rather than terrorisation. Robespierre did not initially join, but was reluctantly elected to the committee in late July 1793 (see Chapter 15).

► **Source 14.26** This coloured engraving depicts a meeting of the Committee of Public Safety.



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By September 1793, the crisis in France forced the National Convention to formally accept the Committee of Public Safety's government by Terror, exemplified by the harsh **Law of Suspects** enacted on 17 September 1793. This law expanded earlier definitions of what sorts of behaviour could make a person suspect so that it could include almost anyone, and shifted the burden of proof onto the suspect, who had to find a way of proving their innocence.

### Law of Suspects

expanded earlier definitions of the types of behaviour that could make a person suspect; it shifted the burden of proof onto the suspect

### FOCUS QUESTIONS 14.2

- 1 What forms did the Terror take, in terms of special committees and special laws?
- 2 To what extent was the popular movement responsible for introducing some of these forms of Terror?

◀ **Source 14.27** The law that allowed authorities to arrest all those 'who, by their conduct or their relationships, either by their words or writings, have been partisans of tyranny or federalism', often on the flimsiest of pretexts

## 14.13 The economic Terror

Well before the revolution, working people had firmly believed that the royal government was responsible to control the price of bread so that it remained affordable; sadly, ministers in royal governments did not always agree with this. Workers in town and country had for centuries used protest and violent riots to demand price-fixing on the most basic unit of survival: bread.

Once the revolution broke out in 1789, the price of bread remained a burning issue, especially because of the storm that destroyed much of the harvest in 1788. As the *sans-culottes* movement grew in confidence and militancy, they again demanded that the National Assembly introduce price controls on bread. However, many deputies in the National Assembly firmly believed that governments should never interfere in the workings of the economy.

By contrast, Robespierre and the Jacobin faction argued that it was necessary to introduce price controls simply to gain the support of working people during the war emergency of 1792–93. On 26 July 1793, Robespierre finally agreed to serve on the Committee of Public Safety, stating ‘food supplies and popular laws’ must be their main focus.

The first law they immediately passed (the same day Robespierre joined) was the Law Against Hoarding. A crucial issue for working people was the danger – partly real, partly imagined – of hoarding. This occurs when wealthy traders or shopkeepers buy up large quantities of any foodstuff, especially harvested grain or milled flour, and put it into storage. Because there is less food available in the markets, demand increases and prices go up. The hoarder then brings out the food and sells it at a much higher profit, which only creates new hardship and shortages for working people.

The new law on hoarding would be popular and help improve food supplies. It also allowed the death penalty on hoarders. Officials were appointed to keep a check on the grain trade and to report hoarders. The 83 departments of France were also given the power to fix the prices of fuel, such as firewood and coal. Later, on 27 October 1793, a National Food Commission was established to oversee the production and sale of food.

**Law of the Maximum** economic policy that set a limit on the price of wheat and flour

**Law of the General Maximum** economic policy that set a limit on the price of all essential goods

The most famous measure of the economic Terror was the **Law of the Maximum**, which was decreed on 4 May 1793. This law initially set a maximum on the price of wheat and flour, in order to bring down the price of bread. However, under further pressure from the *sans-culottes*, and especially from the radical enraged ones, the Jacobins passed **The Law of the General Maximum** on 29 September 1793, which meant that they stated maximum prices for *all* the vital foods and other goods that working people needed.

Price levels were calculated against the prices in 1790, plus 33 per cent more. Clearly, the Jacobins were doing everything they could to signal to working people that they were serious about controlling food prices. In return, the *sans-culottes* would be willing to volunteer to fight in the war, while the dangerous opposition of the militant enraged ones might be softened, if not overcome.



▲ Source 14.28 A *sans-culottes* man sits next to a piece of paper that reads ‘Desires for 1790’, and lists the prices of bread, meat and wine.

## 14.14 The factional Terror

The factional Terror refers to how the Jacobins eliminated rival groups and criticism through using violence. This occurred in a series of stages.

### First stage: The attack on the Girondins

The first stage was the popular attack on the Girondins, who were arrested from 31 May to 2 June in 1793.

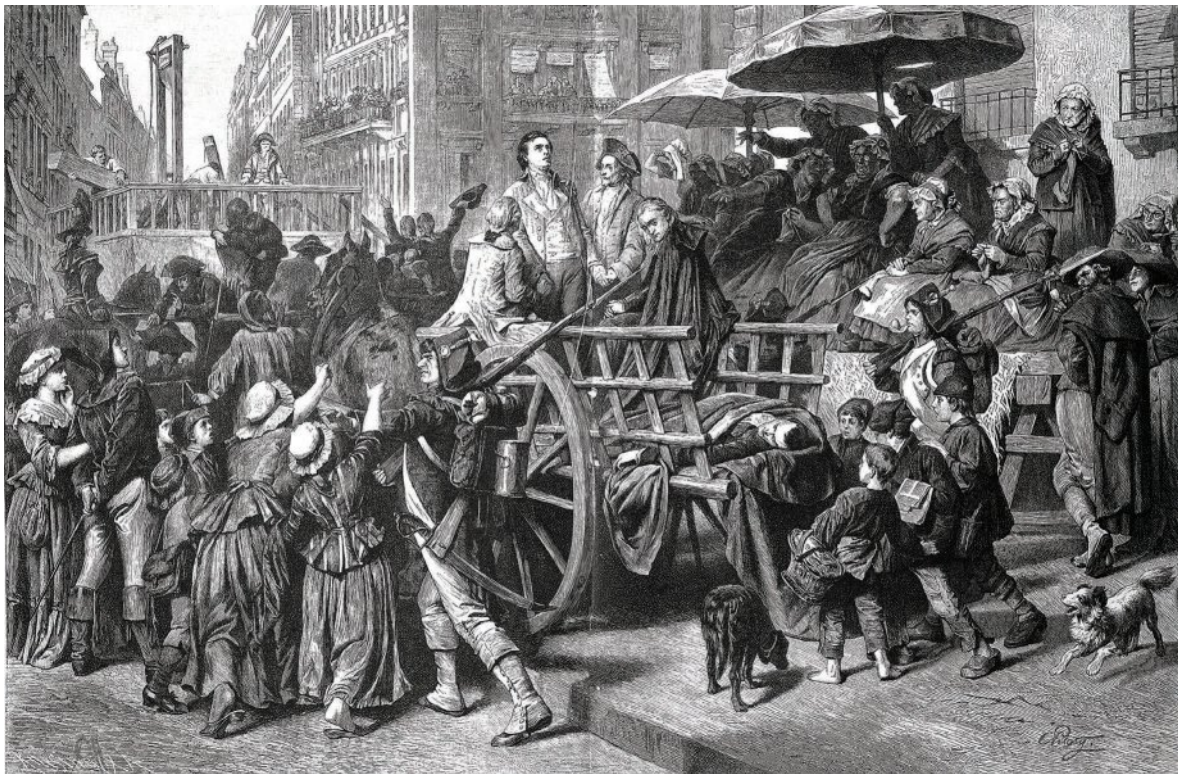
Initially, the Jacobins suggested to the popular movement that the sections of Paris might order the National Convention to expel unpatriotic Girondin deputies. The sections listed the deputies to be purged, secured the support of the National Guard and formed another militia of some 20 000 workers. They conducted the uprising with military precision, surrounding the National Assembly building with armed workers and demanding that 29 Girondin deputies surrender to house arrest. For Robespierre, this had secured the bases of a workable government capable of firm, effective measures to meet the emergency.



▲ **Source 14.29** *The Last Goodbye of the Girondins*. Depicted in this artwork are several famous Girondins, including Brissot and Vergniaud.

The Girondins' trial was on 3 October 1793 and they were executed on 31 October 1793. The Girondins were not the last examples of the Jacobins eliminating their political opposition.

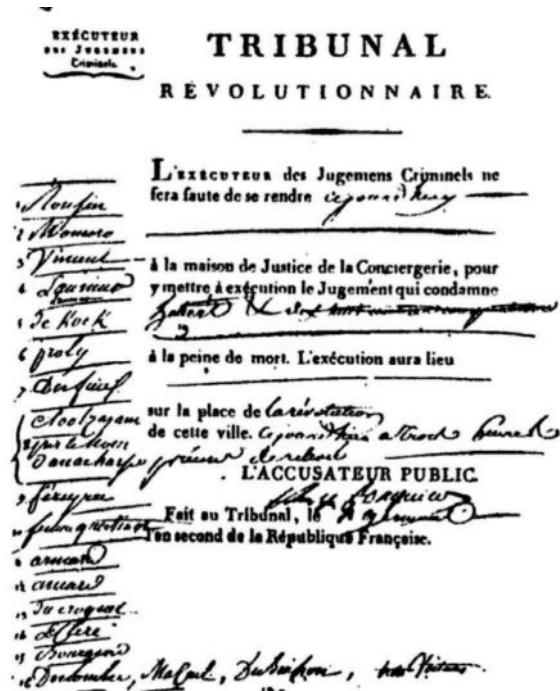
In early 1794, the Jacobins proceeded with their factional Terror; Robespierre argued that, in a state of national emergency, any opposition to a government that was trying to conduct resistance and preserve the revolution was treason. He reasoned that any resistance – whether from the left or the right of the political spectrum – tended to distract and weaken the government, and hence to help the counter-revolution.



▲ Source 14.30 This engraving shows the Girondins being brought to the guillotine.

## Second stage: The attack on the Hébertistes

On 13 March 1794, Robespierre attacked the followers of the radical leader Jacques Hébert, the fiery editor of the *Father Duchesne* newspaper, who had publicly called for an insurrection of working people against the government. Since this contravened a law against insurrection, they were speedily tried and executed within two weeks.



▲ Source 14.31 Left: Jacques Hébert, editor of *Father Duchesne*. Right: The Revolutionary Tribunal's order of execution of the Hébertistes.

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### Third stage: The elimination of Danton and the Indulgents

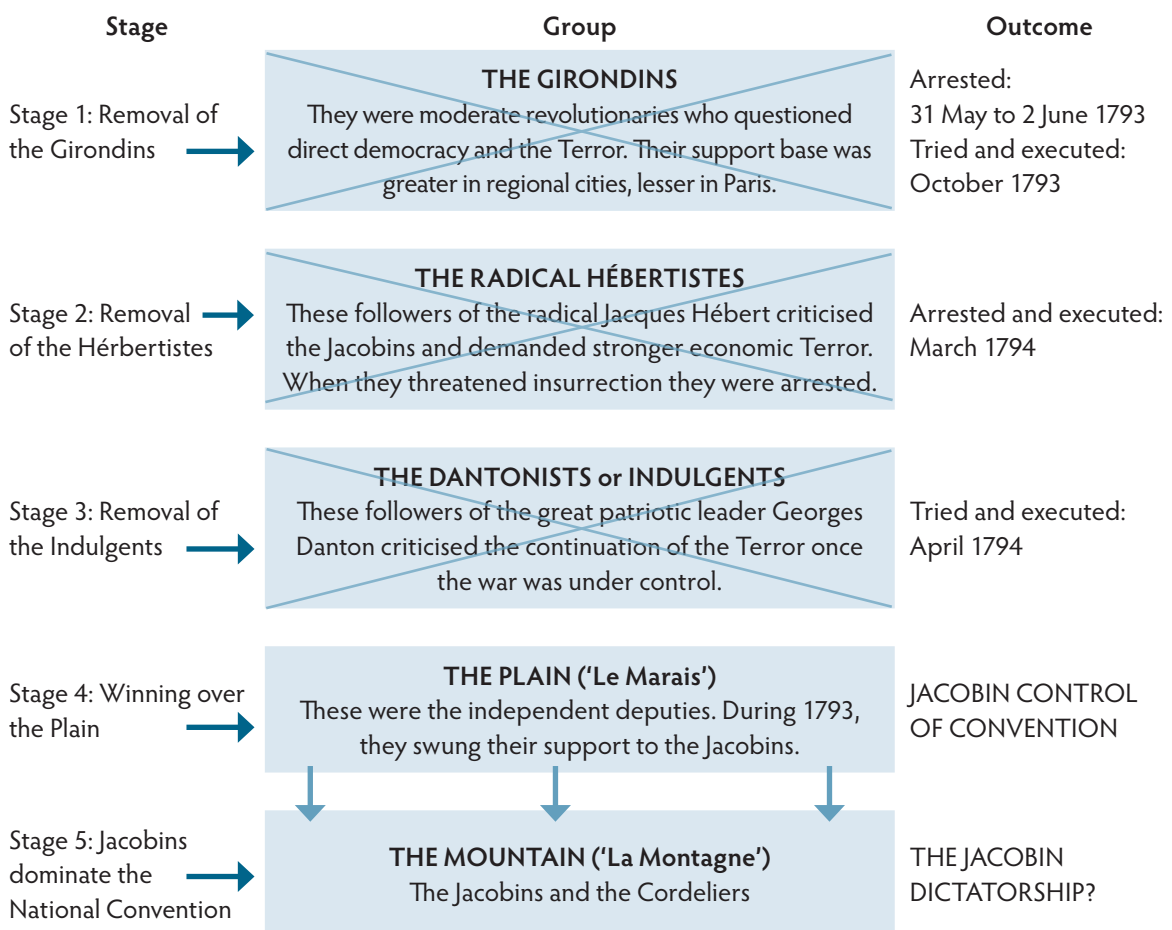
Having silenced the extreme left, Robespierre turned on the moderate faction that had formed around Danton and Desmoulins, and that had demanded the end of the Terror. These **Indulgents** were executed on 5 April 1794.

**Indulgents** an informal group among the Jacobins and the Cordeliers whose members argued that the war was essentially won after the Battle of Fleurus, and the Terror could be wound down

◀ **Source 14.32** This drawing captures the moment the great revolutionary leader Georges Danton went to the guillotine. His 'crime' was to suggest that the Terror needed to end.

### The elimination of all rival groups and criticism

The Jacobins gradually influenced the independent deputies and gained control of the National Convention until there was a kind of Jacobin dictatorship. The stages of the Jacobin factional Terror are outlined in the flowchart.



# 14.15 The Great Terror

**Great Terror** the worst and final stage of the Terror

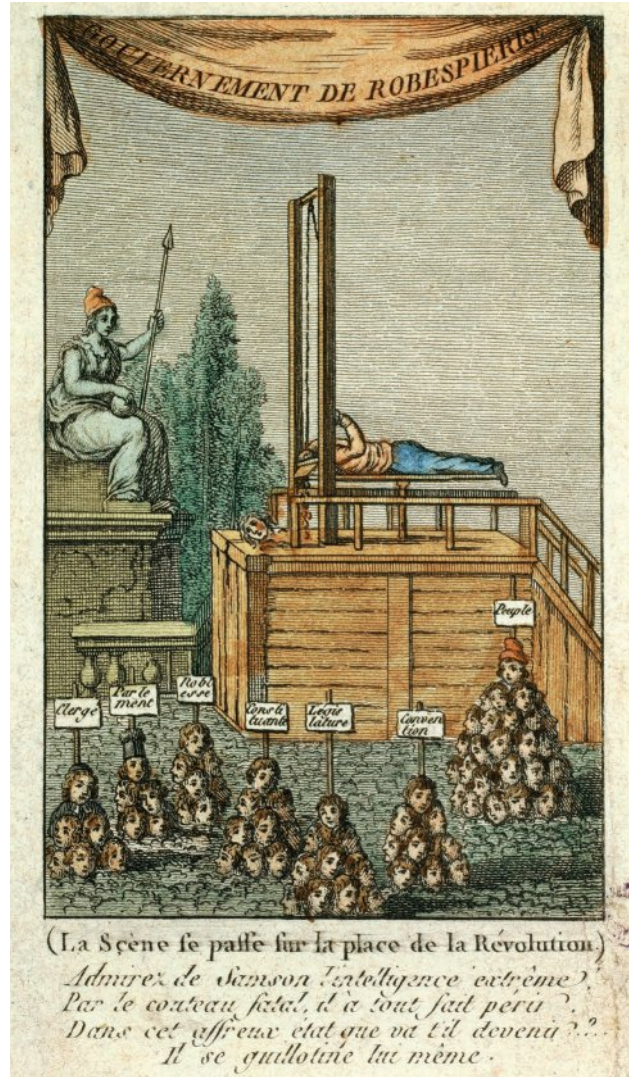
**Law of 22 Prairial** was enacted on 10 June 1794; it exceeded the Law of Suspects in giving the committees power to arrest and execute people, and it eliminated deputies' parliamentary immunity

The **Great Terror** was the worst and final stage of the Terror, which continued and redoubled after the stabilisation of the military situation late in 1793. By late 1793 and early 1794, the war emergency was largely resolved, yet the Terror that had been introduced to meet this emergency continued unabated and even doubled in intensity.

The **Law of 22 Prairial** was enacted on 10 June 1794; it exceeded the Law of Suspects in giving the committees power to arrest and execute people, and it eliminated the deputies' parliamentary immunity. McPhee has researched the number of deaths during this period and reports that 1251 people were executed over four months before the Law of Prairial was enacted, but after the law was introduced, 1376 people were executed in just six weeks.



▲ **Source 14.33** The revolutionary committee member who is gesturing forcefully is saying, 'It is necessary to sweep the territory of the republic, and the great broom, the nation's broom, is the guillotine.'



▲ **Source 14.34** This engraving is an anti-Robespierre image, wrongly suggesting that the death toll of the Terror was entirely due to Robespierre's government. Each pile of heads is labelled, left to right, 'Clergy', 'Parliament', 'Nobility', 'Constituent Assembly', 'Legislative Assembly' and 'Convention', but the largest pile (right) is labelled 'Common People'.

People were now appalled by the sheer number of executions, and the petty nature of the crimes punished. For example, the great scientist Lavoisier was executed simply for having been a part of the old tax-farming system. The relentless executions disgusted the crowds, and the guillotine was moved from the Square of the Revolution (now Place de la Concorde) to suburban Paris, then to the city's fringes.

Jean-Sylvain Bailly, the first president of the National Assembly and leader of the Tennis Court Oath, was condemned for causing the Champ de Mars Massacre. Rouget de Lisle, the author of 'La Marseillaise', was another victim. The revolution was devouring its own children. Marie-Antoinette was also tried and executed. The innocent young royal prince, the **Dauphin** (1785–1795) was not guillotined, but was subjected to such physical and psychological mistreatment that he died in the Temple Prison in 1795. Ultimately, the unstoppable rush of executions dismayed the remaining deputies of the National Convention, and they realised that they could be next.

**Dauphin** innocent young royal prince who was subjected to such physical and psychological mistreatment that he died in the Temple Prison in 1795



▲ Source 14.35 A watercolour by Bericourt titled *Transporting Victims of the Terror*



◀ Source 14.36 (Left) Marie-Antoinette was one of many victims executed during the Terror. The painter Jacques-Louis David watched her journey to the guillotine from a first-floor window, which is imagined by a later artist in this painting. (Right) This is the original sketch that Jacques-Louis David quickly drew of the devastated woman.



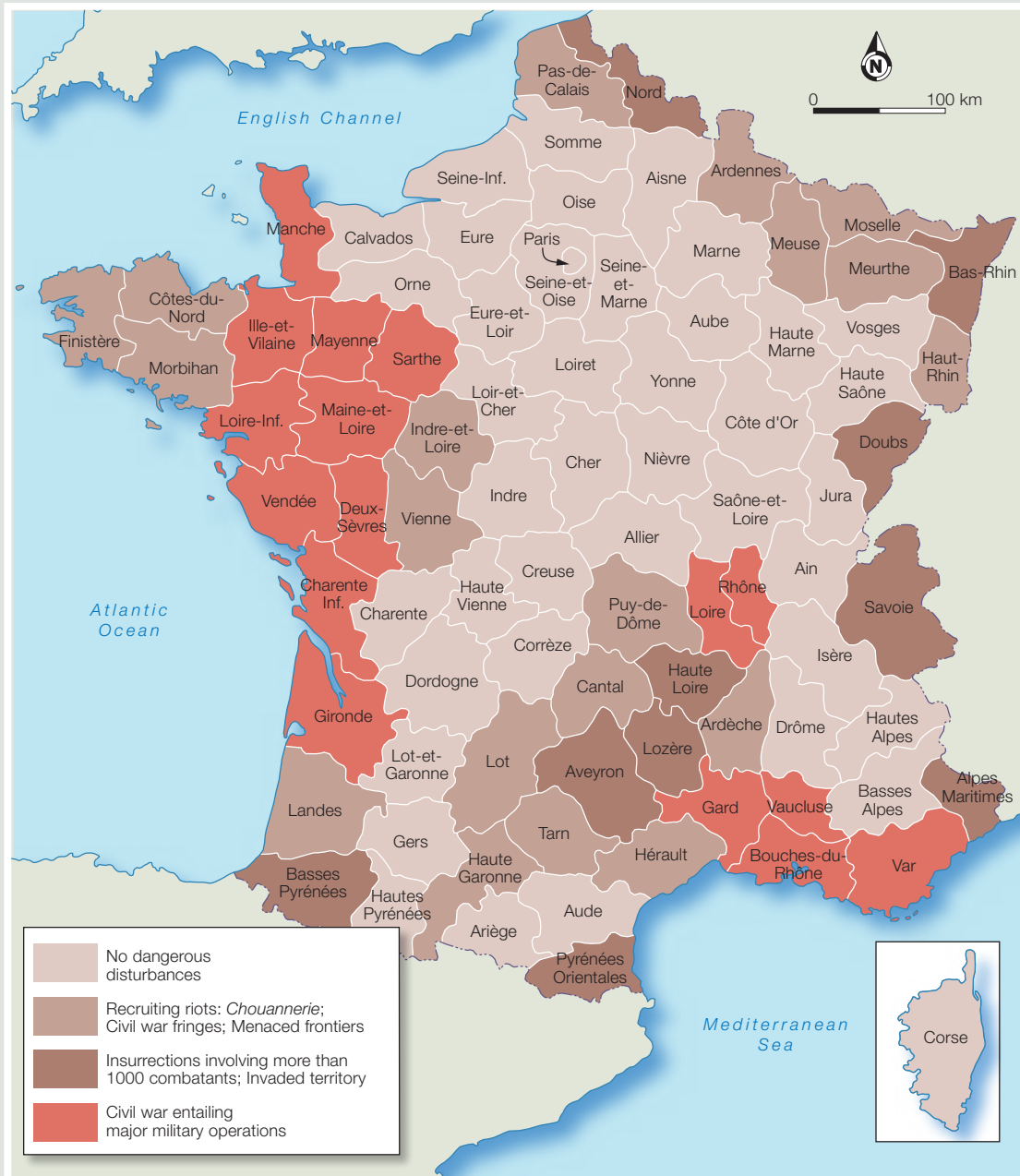
ANALYSIS ACTIVITY 14.2: READING MAP AND DATA SOURCES



MAPPING THE TERROR

The map in Source 14.37 shows four levels of counter-revolutionary activity, with the most serious marked in red.

Document 1: Map of the counter-revolution



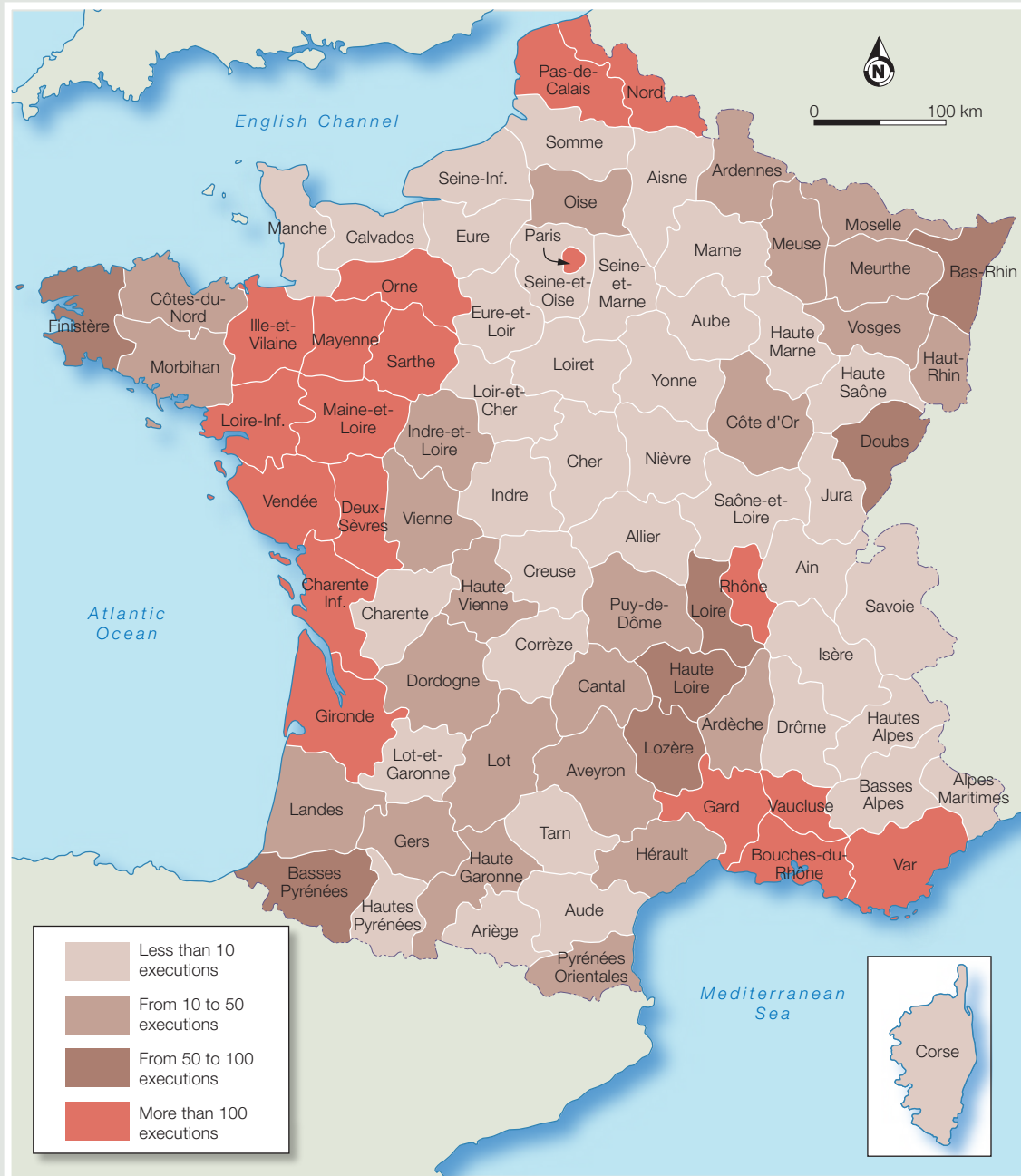
▲ Source 14.37 The map is from Donald Greer, *The Incidence of the Terror During the French Revolution: A Statistical Interpretation*, 1935.

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**Document 2: Map – the incidence of executions**

The map in Source 14.38 shows four levels of the incidence of executions during the Terror, with the most frequent marked in red.



▲ **Source 14.38** This map is from Donald Greer, *The Incidence of the Terror During the French Revolution: A Statistical Interpretation*, 1935.

- 1 After examining Greer's two maps, write a brief analysis of the relationship between the incidence of counter-revolutionary activities and the incidence of the Terror.
- 2 What do these two maps suggest about the origins and purpose of the Terror?



Below are tables that outline the alleged crimes across France during the Terror by social class.

**Table 16.1: The incidence of the Terror/causes of indictments**

|                    | Number | %    | Of whom women | % of each category |
|--------------------|--------|------|---------------|--------------------|
| Old nobility       | 878    | 6.2  | 226           | 21.36              |
| Robe nobility      | 278    | 2.0  |               |                    |
| Upper middle class | 1 964  | 14.0 | 137           | 6.98               |
| Lower middle class | 1 488  | 31.2 | 389           | 8.86               |
| Clergy             | 920    | 6.5  | 126           | 13.70              |
| Working classes    | 4 389  | 31.2 | 389           | 8.86               |
| Peasantry          | 3 961  | 28.1 | 281           | 7.09               |
| Unknown            | 200    | 1.4  | 65            | 32.50              |
| TOTAL              | 14 080 | –    | 1314          | 9.33               |

**Table 16.2: The causes of indictments during the Terror**

| Causes of indictments for revolutionary offences                           | Number | %    |
|--|--------|------|
| Emigration   | 212    | 1.5  |
| Intelligence with the enemy  | 457    | 3.1  |
| Sedition   | 10 456 | 72.1 |
| Federalism   | 427    | 2.9  |
| Treason  | 96     | 0.7  |
| Conspiracy   | 703    | 4.9  |
| Offences involving trees of liberty  | 12     | 0.1  |
| Counter-revolutionary opinions   | 1 302  | 9.0  |
| Economic offences (hoarding, traffic in <i>assignats</i> , counterfeiting) | 119    | 0.8  |
| Corruption   | 104    | 0.7  |
| False witness  | 11     | 0.1  |
| Refractory clergy  | 293    | 2.0  |
| Concealment of refractory clergy   | 32     | 0.2  |
| Other  | 273    | 1.9  |
| TOTAL  | 14 497 | –    |

**Table 16.3: The social incidence of the Terror in Paris**

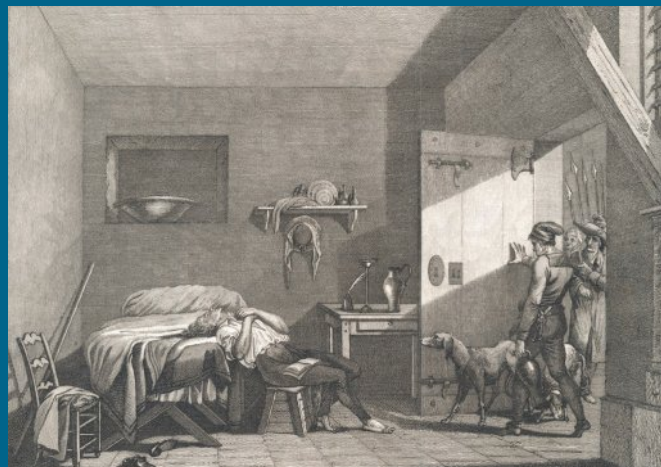
| Paris Revolutionary Tribunal | Number | %    |
|------------------------------|--------|------|
| Nobles                       | 533    | 19.4 |
| Clergy                       | 240    | 8.7  |
| Upper middle class           | 903    | 32.9 |
| Lower middle class           | 540    | 19.7 |
| Workers                      | 478    | 17.4 |
| Unknown                      | 53     | 1.9  |
| TOTAL                        | 2 747  | –    |

These tables (adapted from Colin Jones, *The Longman Companion to the French Revolution*, 1988, p. 120) give an idea of the alleged crimes for which people were executed. Information from Donald Greer, *The Incidence of the Terror During the French Revolution: A Statistical Interpretation* (1935) and J.L. Godfrey, *Revolutionary Justice* (1951). (Note that the Paris figures from Godfrey, 1951, differ slightly from those of Greer, 1935.)

- 1 To what extent is the popular image of the Great Terror as a 'holocaust of the nobility' confirmed by the figures shown in the tables?
- 2 What does the list of causes of indictments for revolutionary offences suggest about the main causes of the Great Terror?

**AMAZING BUT TRUE ...**

One of the most brilliant thinkers of the revolution, the *philosophe* Condorcet, tried to escape the Terror by fleeing Paris disguised as a workman. He successfully reached the outskirts of Paris, but made the mistake of stopping at an inn and ordering an omelette made up of several eggs – a luxury no working person could afford. The revolutionary innkeeper reported the suspicious event to the authorities and Condorcet was identified and arrested. He committed suicide in prison in 1794 to avoid the guillotine. However, the revolutionaries still insisted on punishment being carried out, so they guillotined the dead body anyway.



▲ Source 14.39 Condorcet preferred to die by his own hand than face the guillotine.

**THE STORY SO FAR**

By late 1793, the revolution was threatened by numerous serious, interlocking challenges. A series of emergency measures were put in place such as the revolutionary government and Terror. These measures destroyed many of the political and civil liberties the revolution had created earlier. However, the harsh laws, which allowed relatively easy arrests and imprisonment, enabled the emergency government to resolve a major crisis that could have otherwise destroyed the revolution.

Use the QR code or visit the Interactive Textbook and watch the video summarising the chapter.





## Develop your historical-thinking skills

### Define key terms

Write your own definition of each of the following key terms:

- popular taxation
- homeland in danger
- conscription
- Federalist revolt
- dechristianisation
- Terror
- Committee of Public Safety.

### Analysing cause and consequence

Evaluate the extent to which the experience of war and civil war was the main force guiding the development of the new society in France between 1792 and 1794.

### Constructing historical arguments

To what extent did the new society created in France during the period 1792–94 really change the political, economic and social structures of France.

### Analysing historian's interpretations

#### William Doyle (1942–)

In 1989, historian William Doyle wrote:

*It was resistance that made the revolution become violent. It was naive of the men of 1789 to think that they could regenerate the nation without opposition, and imagine that the honesty and benevolence of their intentions would be as obvious to others as to themselves ... Even after the nation had been sickened with public carnage [i.e. the mass killings of the Terror], politicians still found it impossible to accept the legitimacy and good faith of their opponents.*

**Source 14.40** William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 1989, p. 394

- 1 Why does Doyle believe that the revolutionaries had been naive about what they were trying to do?
- 2 From your understanding of events so far, do you believe that revolutions are automatically violent or that, as Doyle suggests, they only become violent when people start to resist them?

## Using quotes as evidence

Write a sentence using a short phrase from one of the quotes below or contrast the views from a few of the quotes. You can also use any of the quotes in the chapter. Any quotes you choose can be used directly or paraphrased into your own words.

### The Vendée Revolt

*The rising in the Vendée was the most dangerous example of the various forms of resistance encountered by the Revolution and was symptomatic of the widespread discontent of the peasantry.*

**Albert Soboul, historian**

*This was an open rebellion against the entire course the Revolution had taken.*

**William Doyle, historian**

*The revolt was not initially counter-revolutionary so much as anti-revolutionary.*

**Peter McPhee, historian**

*It is appropriate to describe the Vendée as an 'anti-revolution' rather than a counter-revolution in that it was directed more against the Revolution and its demands rather than for a restoration of the old regime.*

**Dylan Rees, historian**

### The Terror

*But to realise their aims, France's new rulers were compelled ... to abandon the haphazard methods of government accepted by their predecessors ... So the needs of war, civil war and public order combined to persuade Robespierre and his associates to take further steps to strengthen their control in Paris.*

**George Rudé, historian**

*Thus began the cycle of violence that ended ... in the forest of guillotines. From the very beginning – from the summer of 1789 – violence was the motor of the Revolution.*

**Simon Schama, historian**

*Even though the Terror did not last long, its legacy was the reintroduction of the spirit of religious warfare ... Both politics and war became black-and-white struggles between good and evil, with compromise or negotiation ruled out.*

**D.G. Wright, historian**

*From the summer of 1793 to the summer of 1794, the period known to history as 'The Terror', the revolution was saved from its internal and external enemies, at considerable costs to human life and the infant political democracy of the early 1790s ...*

**Gwynne Lewis, historian**

A portrait of Maximilien de Robespierre, a French revolutionary leader. He is depicted from the chest up, wearing a white cravat and a dark coat with a high collar. He has a serious expression and is looking slightly to the left. The background is a dark, textured grey.

# 15 THE ROLE OF MAXIMILIEN DE ROBESPIERRE AND OTHER SIGNIFICANT INDIVIDUALS, 1792–94

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*The secret of liberty is to enlighten men, as that of tyranny is to keep them in ignorance.*

–ROBESPIERRE, 1792

## Overview

By 1792, Maximilien de Robespierre, who had participated in the revolution from the start, emerged as a prominent political leader. He remains the figure most commonly associated with the French Revolution, but he is also the most misunderstood.

It is difficult to penetrate the cloud of mythology that surrounded Robespierre when alive; upon his death, he became the focus for those who condemned or applauded the revolution. Robespierre's celebrity – or notoriety – as a leader is based primarily upon his revolutionary activity during the emergency phase of the revolution (1792–94).

Robespierre provided considerable intellectual leadership to the revolution through his writings and speeches. He also mastered popular leadership, commanding a strong following among the Parisian people. Throughout his career, three powerful forces combined: the role of the leader, the popular movement and revolutionary ideas. His rapid ascent to a position of enormous power, and his sudden and fatal fall, make him an ideal example of a revolutionary leader to study.



There were also other leaders in the French Revolution such as Georges-Jacques Danton and Jean-Paul Marat; it is important to understand their contributions to leadership during this crisis period of the revolution as well.

## Key issues

- Why did Robespierre emerge as a leader in a time of crisis?
- What were Robespierre's qualities as a leader?
- What was Robespierre's relationship with the revolutionary movement?
- Was Robespierre the first example of the 'professional revolutionary'?
- How did Robespierre make political use of paranoia?
- What are the recent views on Robespierre?
- What was the role of other leaders in the revolution in the years 1792–94?

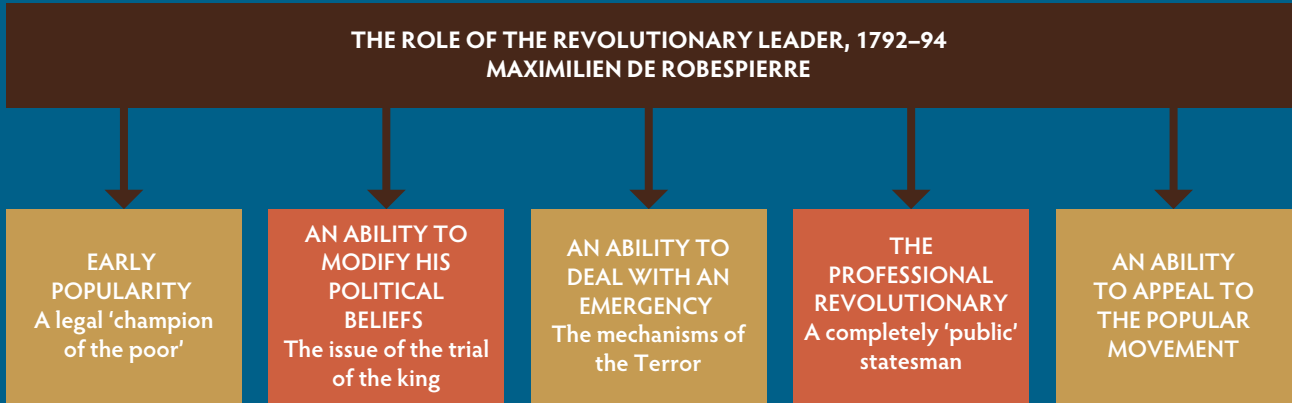
## Digital resources for this chapter

In the *Interactive Textbook*:

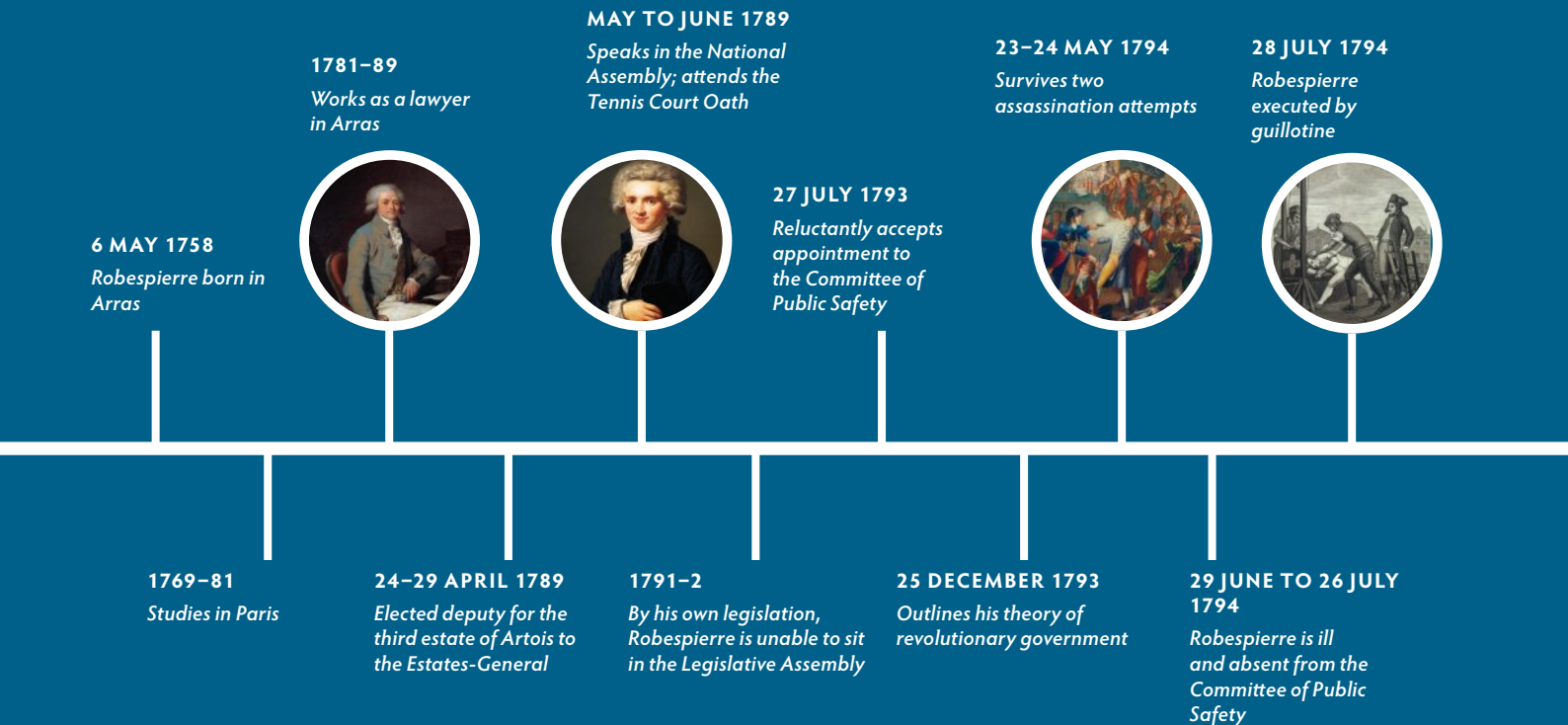
-  Video and audio sources and questions
-  Digital activities.

◀ **Source 15.0** This portrait of Robespierre in about 1792 shows that he maintained the elegant dress and the polished manners of an old-regime gentleman, thus going against the revolutionary taste for simpler manners and dress.

# Flow of chapter



# Chapter timeline





## 15.1

## SIGNIFICANT INDIVIDUAL



### Maximilien de Robespierre (1758–1794)

Maximilien de Robespierre was born in 1758 into a bourgeois family in the town of Arras. He followed his father and grandfather into law, being admitted to the bar in 1781. Like many revolutionary leaders, Robespierre's introduction to radical thought occurred through his profession.



▲ **Source 15.1** This portrait shows Robespierre as a successful young lawyer in 1783, around the time when he gained a reputation for defending both enlightened scientific thought and championing the common man.

A brilliant barrister, Robespierre was rapidly promoted to responsible positions. In 1783, his defence of the scientific use of lightning rods aligned him with an enlightened society. Later, his defence of a ropemaker who had been accused of theft by a dishonest monk led him to attack the Catholic Church itself. His victory won him the reputation of being 'the upholder of the wretched, avenger of innocence'. By 1788, this role inspired Robespierre to attack privilege and denounce the old regime's fundamental injustices. As a critic of royal absolutism, he was elected by a workers' guild to represent Arras at the Estates-General.

Robespierre was an admirer of the *philosophes*, and his ideals were formed by Voltaire and Rousseau. At the start of the revolution, he wrote this statement of principles to the people of his region:

- 1 *The aim of society is the happiness of all.*
- 2 *All men are born free and equal in rights, and cannot cease to be so.*
- 3 *The principle of sovereignty resides in the nation; all power emanates [comes from] and can only emanate from it.*

**Source 15.2** Cited in McPhee, *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life*, p. 232

#### How did Robespierre acquire his early popularity?

Robespierre's political career began on 6 June 1789 when he first spoke in political assembly and attacked the upper clergy. He initially failed to impress because he could not speak forcefully. When the National Assembly became the Constituent Assembly, Robespierre progressed from the 'lawyer of the poor man' to the political spokesman of working people. More democratic than most deputies, he condemned martial law in October 1790, attacked the active–passive citizen division in April 1791 and demanded an 'open' National Guard. He also wrote a passionate speech condemning capital punishment:

*When fanaticism, born of the monstrous union of ignorance and despotism, invented in its turn the crimes of divine lèse-majesté [crimes against the king or state], when it conceived, in its delirium, to take vengeance for God, was it not necessary to offer Him blood, and thus reduce to the level of monsters those who thought they were created in His image?*

**Source 15.3** Translated from the French by Michael Adcock

When Robespierre delivered this speech to the Constituent Assembly on 30 May 1791, he had little idea of the coming revolutionary emergency that would force him to compromise these ideals.

## 15.2 Robespierre's qualities as a leader

Biographer David Jordan argues that Robespierre was the main revolutionary leader who guided the revolution through its greatest crisis. The deputies called him to power in late July of 1793 by electing him to the Committee of Public Safety. This gave him authority to use extraordinary measures to solve a situation that threatened to destroy the revolution altogether.

People who see Robespierre as an extremist are confusing cause and effect; he only directly exerted power during the last year of his life, and this was under conditions that were themselves extreme.

Robespierre was the architect of a set of emergency measures known as 'revolutionary government' (see Chapter 14). From a contemporary viewpoint, these were severe but necessary temporary measures that were created progressively to deal with a serious crisis. Robespierre proposed – probably correctly – that the revolution would only survive the war emergency if it allied itself with the armed working people of Paris:

*What we need is a single will ... This rising must continue until the measures necessary for saving the Republic have been taken. The people must ally itself with the [National] Convention, and the [National] Convention must make use of the people.*

**Source 15.4** Quoted in William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 1989, p. 7

Robespierre also proposed that the National Convention give executive powers to smaller, more efficient committees. On 6 April 1793, the final Committee of Public Safety was created, although Robespierre did not join it until 27 July 1793 – and then unwillingly. The legal basis of the committee's power was defined carefully by the National Convention: it was to take executive measures to ensure the internal

and external defence of the republic, but it could not declare war, make peace or pass legislation. It met secretly, without a **quorum**, and passed security decrees by simple majority. Once Robespierre joined, the committee began its proper task of saving the republic. This was a 'war

emergency cabinet' endowed with extraordinary powers to fulfil the task of winning the war.

According to Jordan, Robespierre then achieved the ultimate goal of revolutionary leaders, to serve – initially, at least – as a unifying force for the many different groups in the revolution:

*He was the living link between the committee and the [National] Convention, the committee and the Jacobins, the committee and the commune, and the committee and the sans-culottes. For the moment, he seemed about to reconcile all the terrible contradictions of the revolution in his person.*

**Source 15.5** Quoted in David Jordan, *The Revolutionary Career of Maximilien Robespierre*, 1985, p. 168

Despite his enormous authority, Robespierre did not control the committee in policy matters. His power came from his ability to articulate his ideas, and he spoke ceaselessly – at the Jacobins Club and before the National Convention – on almost every matter of national importance.



▲ **Source 15.6** This portrait shows Robespierre dressed in the sober black costume of a Third Estate deputy at the meeting of the Estates-General in May 1789.

## Robespierre changes his political beliefs in a time of crisis

How did Robespierre change his political beliefs as the revolution developed? Until July 1792, Robespierre believed that the political crisis caused by the king's betrayal in fleeing to Varennes could be solved by constitutional change. However, Robespierre gradually came to support – and possibly help organise – the insurrection of August 1792, which toppled the monarchy.

After Robespierre had been elected to the National Convention as a deputy for Paris in September 1792, he soon realised that power was caught in a struggle between the Jacobins and the Girondins. This power struggle played out over issues like the response to pressure from the radical Paris Commune and the speedy execution of the king for treason. Robespierre believed that the pressure of war and revolution made political stability necessary, even at the cost of eliminating rival political parties.

He therefore abandoned his early liberal beliefs – such as the idea that an elected assembly is inviolable – and accepted that the popular movement could exert direct and violent pressure on the National Convention. Robespierre may not directly have provoked the popular rebellion of 31 May to 2 June 1793, but he was aware of its intentions and accepted its serious outcome; that is, an armed crowd forced the political assembly to give up 29 Girardin deputies to arrest, leaving the Jacobins in control.

## 15.3 Robespierre's relationship with the revolutionary movement

The Jacobins had armed the militant *sans-culottes* who patrolled the streets to defend the revolution, both abroad and at home. This alliance with the people had two results: it forced Robespierre to support the economic policies that were most important to working people, most notably the laws on maximum prices on food, and also to implement these policies with the greater severity demanded by working people, such as the death penalty for hoarding, which came into effect on 26 July 1793.

The basis of Robespierre's leadership was a special popularity. He enjoyed credibility as a defender of democratic causes:

*I am not the defender of the people. I am of the people, and have never been anything else.*

**Source 15.7** Quoted in Patrice Gueniffey, 'Robespierre', in François Furet and Mona Ozouf (eds), *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, 1989, p. 301

By 1792 he had, as Patrice Gueniffey suggests, come to represent – even to embody – the will of the people. Robespierre's relationship with the popular revolutionary movement was, curiously, both distant and close. While many bourgeois revolutionaries secretly feared working people, Robespierre was unusual in championing the crowd:

*Stop slandering the people by constantly portraying it as unworthy of enjoying its rights ... It is you who are unjust and corrupt; it is the people [who are] good, patient and generous.*

**Source 15.8** Quoted in Patrice Gueniffey, 'Robespierre', in François Furet and Mona Ozouf (eds), *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, 1989, p. 301.

Such statements favoured the popular movement, and suggested that some revolutionaries did not respect 'the people'. This was no vague goodwill; Robespierre specifically committed himself to the idea of direct democracy, by which the crowd has a right to take direct and violent action against its enemies. While his counterparts were horrified by this violence, some radicals publicly praised it: Robespierre stated that Foulon had been executed by the will of the people, and his supporter Desmoulins famously asked whether anybody's blood is so pure that it cannot be shed.

Such declarations thrilled working-class militants; his speeches were eagerly followed by the public in the gallery of the National Assembly, and were passionately discussed in taverns and cafes.



## Robespierre's public image: A democrat but not a demagogue

An important aspect of Robespierre's leadership was what we might refer to as his public image. Usually, a democratic politician adopts the simple manners and dress of a 'champion of the people', partly to express sympathy for them and partly to help them identify with him. Curiously, Robespierre did not. Portraits reveal that, when others were adopting a democratic, egalitarian style of dress, he kept the elegant formal clothing, the powdered wig and the impeccable manners of an old-regime gentleman.

**demagogue** political leader who appeals to people's emotions to gain power

Robespierre was not naturally a **demagogue**. His relationship with the popular movement was special; the *sans-culottes* admired him not for his personal qualities, but for his policies (sympathy for direct democracy and acceptance of government economic interference) and his apparent representation of the popular will. Strangely, Robespierre enjoyed greater popularity than the self-styled 'friends of the people'; in the elections to the National Convention, he was the most popular deputy, gaining more votes than either Marat or Danton.



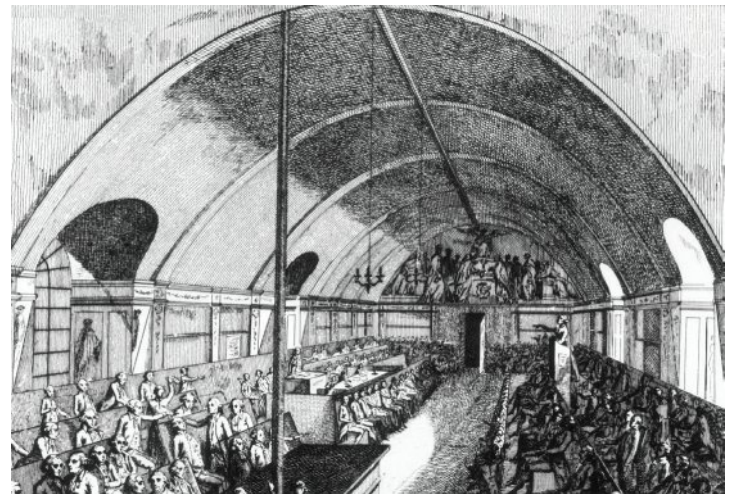
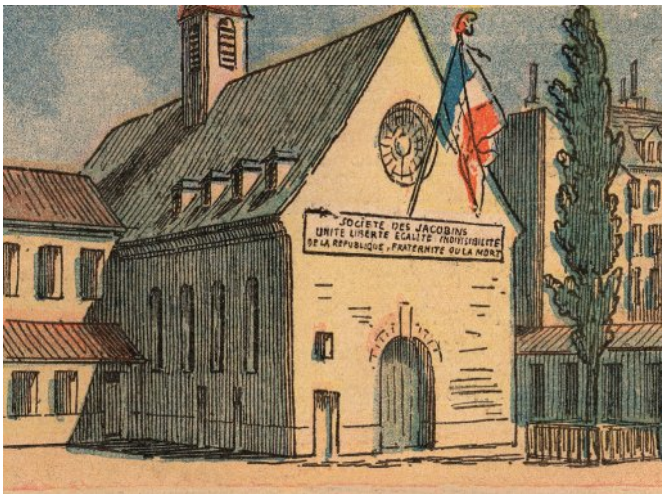
▲ Source 15.9 From left to right: Danton, Marat and Robespierre

## Robespierre's national network of Jacobin Clubs

Robespierre's leadership was based upon his mastery of the revolutionary movement outside of official political assemblies. His second important venue for political expression was the club. He first joined the Breton Club, which later became the Jacobin Club. By April 1790, he was its president, but more importantly, he learned how to dominate discussions with his public speaking, easily outshining other capable speakers such as Mirabeau. Robespierre also frequented a number of other popular clubs in Paris, building up a strong mass following.

### AMAZING BUT TRUE ...

Robespierre had many enemies, due partly to his authority and partly to his involvement in the Terror. He also made enemies in a curious way; he was so short-sighted that he often passed people in the streets of Paris without recognising them as colleagues, and he lost a good number of supporters due to this apparent rudeness.



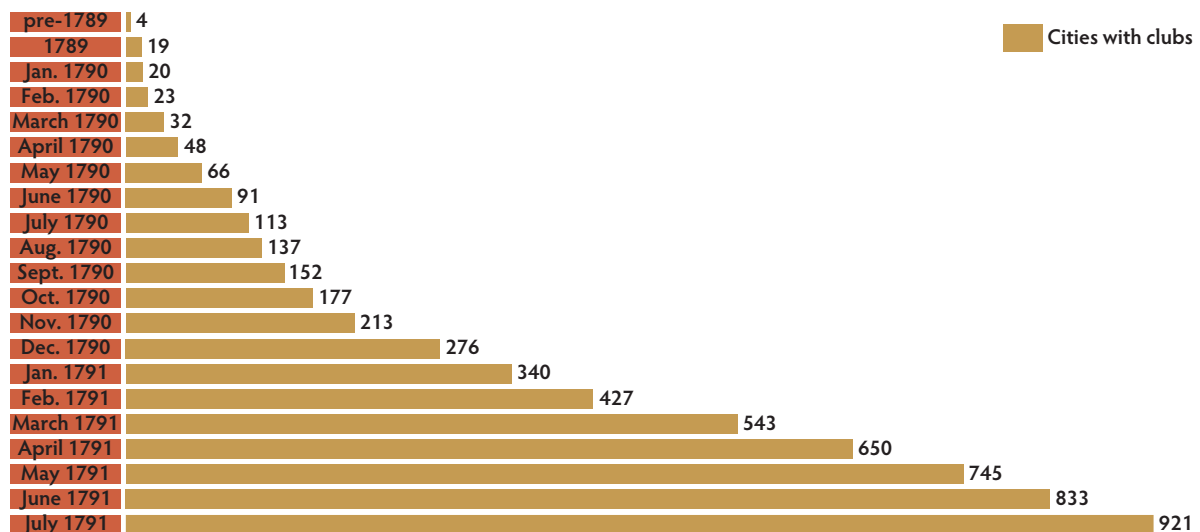
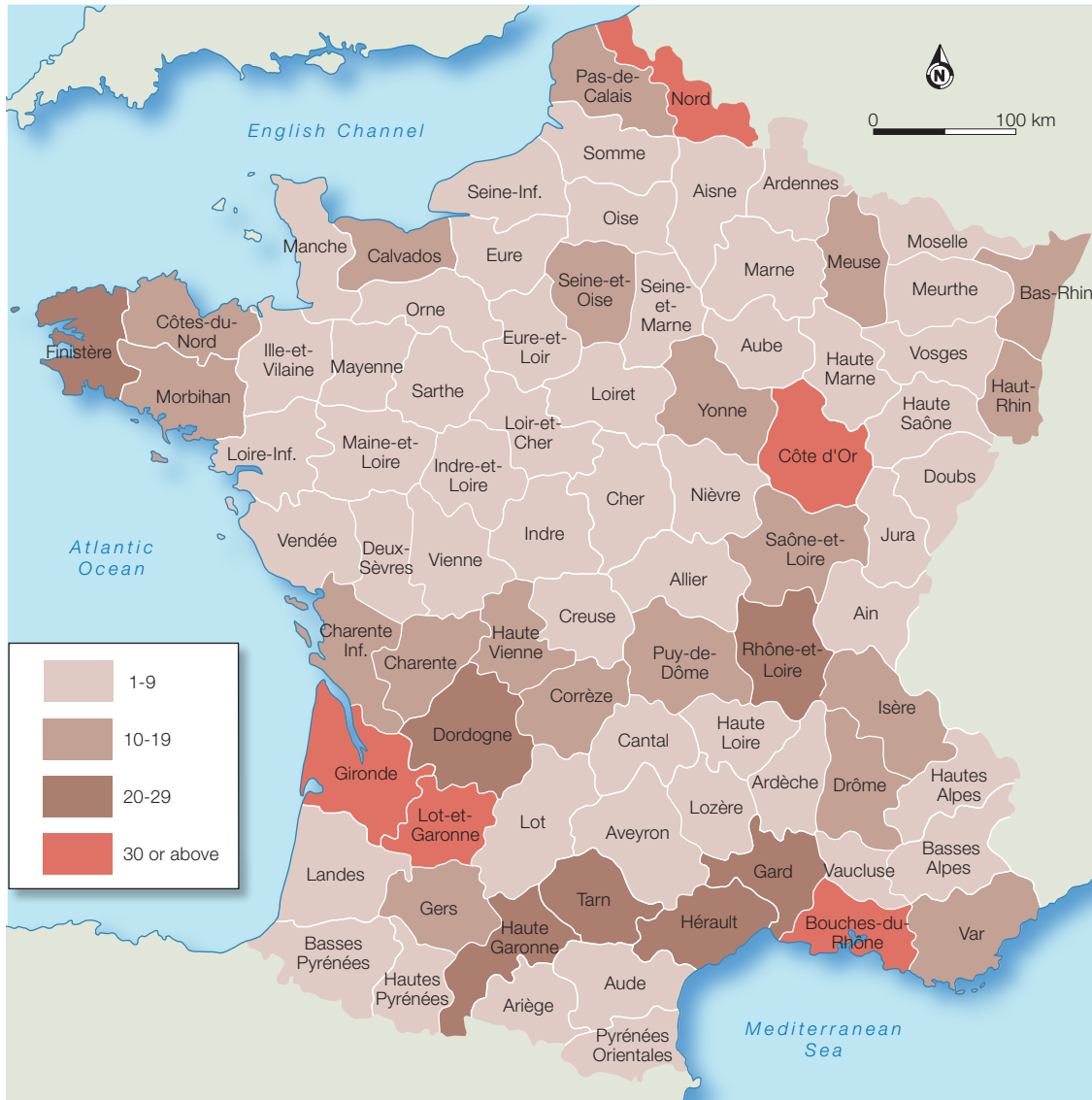
▲ **Source 15.10** *Left*: This engraving shows the Jacobin Club in Paris. It was not just a place to meet and discuss; it was the centre of the whole Jacobin faction and the nerve centre of a network of similar clubs spread across France. *Right*: The interior of a typical Jacobin Club.

**FOCUS QUESTIONS 15.1**

- 1 How did Robespierre gain his early reputation as a friend of the common person?
- 2 Why was Robespierre's public image strangely out of line with his popularity with the revolutionary movement?



▲ **Source 15.11** *Left*: This painting by Lesueur shows a member of the Jacobin Club making a passionate speech. *Right*: This journal shows how the Jacobins discovered what we today call networking; the Jacobin Club in Paris created a web of 5500 similar clubs across France. As soon as a speech was delivered in Paris, it was printed and distributed across the whole nation.



▲ Source 15.12 Top: Departments in France with Jacobin Clubs. Bottom: The growth of the Jacobin Club network from before 1789 to July 1791.

## 15.4 The professional revolutionary

According to biographer David Jordan, Robespierre's significance as a leader was that he represented a completely new type of revolutionary. Robespierre's contemporaries, as well as subsequent historians, believed that he had established the model of the 'professional revolutionary' – one who sacrifices his private life to public affairs. Jordan outlines that we know little about Robespierre's first 30 years, and that for the brief five years of his revolutionary career 'his personal and public lives are virtually indistinguishable' (*The Revolutionary Career of Maximilien Robespierre*, 1985, p. 5).

Historian Peter McPhee has recently remedied this by insisting that we must understand the first 30 years of Robespierre's life before we can understand the way he acted after 1789. McPhee says that Robespierre must be 'understood as a young man, as uncertain about the future as he was exhilarated by its possibilities' (*The French Revolution, 1789–1799*, 2002, p. 104). However, according to other biographers, Robespierre not only led the French Revolution, but also embodied (represented) it. He did so by an act of **self-sublimation**, providing the first model of the virtuous citizen.

**self-sublimation**  
eliminating personal interests in favour of the public interest

### The incorruptible politician

The essence of Robespierre's reputation was his integrity. He offered the quality of evident sincerity when the revolution itself was becoming more divided and factionalised. By 1790, his popular nickname was 'The Incorruptible'. Robespierre rapidly became the defender of the great principles of the revolution, rarely initiating decrees himself while in the National Assembly, but subjecting all new laws to merciless examination. He became the conscience of the revolution, probing his fellow revolutionaries for hidden motives and selfish ambitions.



#### AMAZING BUT TRUE ...

In any nation, a survey of the historical figures who have been commemorated by statues reveals who is really considered important. It is extraordinary that, while Paris has a statue of Danton, it has no major monument to Robespierre; there is only a small bust of the leader on display in the radical working-class suburb of St Denis.

◀ Source 15.13 A bust of Robespierre in St Denis

## 15.5 The political use of paranoia

One aspect of Robespierre's leadership would prove to be his downfall. Historian Alphonse Aulard believes that Robespierre made systematic use of a sort of political paranoia, constantly hinting that the revolutionary project was being frustrated by treacherous but invisible enemies who must be identified and eliminated.

This technique was particularly powerful during the emergency of 1792–93, when the enemies of the revolution were multiplying and threatening its completion. Robespierre never named these enemies directly, simply hinting that he knew them. As soon as one group of opponents was eliminated, another seemed to come into existence. On 12 June 1794, just after the passing of the Law of Prairial, a deputy challenged Robespierre to say who he was criticising. He answered:

*I will name them when I need to. At every moment of the day, at every moment even of the night, there are plotters working to insinuate into the minds of the men of good faith who sit on the Mountain, the falsest ideas, the most atrocious slanders.*

**Source 15.14** Cited in McPhee, *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life*, 2012, p. 204

According to Aulard, Robespierre's threats caused 'vague feelings, a vague admiration, a vague terror, vague hope. He made the tyranny of uncertainty weigh on people's minds'. This works in the short term, but ultimately it is dangerous because it intimidates people. In the longer term, the technique would cause Robespierre's downfall.

### FOCUS QUESTIONS 15.2

- 1 What was Robespierre's main technique for controlling other revolutionaries?
- 2 What are the dangers of using this form of control?



► **Source 15.15** Sketch of Robespierre by Antoine-Jean Gros, circa 1790s



ANALYSIS ACTIVITY 15.1: READING A PRIMARY SOURCE



Source 15.16 shows an etching by the artist Jules Perrin, who uses exaggeration in the form of multiplying the number of guillotines far beyond what would ever have been seen in one place, to communicate meaning. Perrin correctly suggests that once a process of Terror is implemented, it tends to gather momentum and to draw in many more victims than intended – often for minor crimes.

The multiplication of guillotines is visually powerful, but it is reinforced by a textual element that is often omitted when this image is published – the caption. In the etching, each guillotine is identified by a letter and these letters are identified in the caption, which explains the general message with dreadful clarity. For example, 'A' represents the guillotine for the executioner (Robespierre) himself, 'B' is the Committee of Public Safety, 'C' is the Committee of General Security, 'D' is the revolutionary tribunal, 'E' is the Jacobins, 'F' is the Cordeliers, 'G' is the Brissotins, 'H' is the Philipotins, 'I' is the Hébertists, 'M' is nobles and priests, 'N' is men of talent, 'O' is old people, women and children, 'P' is soldiers and generals, 'Q' is constitutional authorities, 'R' is the National Convention and 'S' is the popular societies.

The details in the caption are important because they make the nature of the artist's criticism clear: Perrin is accusing the Jacobins of eliminating virtually every shade of opinion from the political landscape.

Indeed, the image contains even more serious accusations. Robespierre tramples two documents, the Constitution of 1791 and the Constitution of 1793. Therefore, the artist alleges that Robespierre and the Jacobins not only suspended the democratic Constitution of 1793, but destroyed it.

Perrin refers to the human cost of the Terror by the individual example of a corpse visible in the wicker basket beneath the guillotine and by a gruesome inscription on the obelisk behind him: 'Here lies all of France.'

During 1793–94, Perrin's belief that the Terror would continue to escalate until it killed nearly everybody, became widespread and helped prepare the way for the later dramatic fall of Robespierre. This etching is dated c. 1793 by James Cuno, perhaps because it represents the widespread doubts about the Terror after the end of the war emergency, but before Robespierre's fall. The image is also a critique of Robespierre himself; apparently Perrin himself went to the guillotine for this attack.



- 1 What is the main criticism of Robespierre being made in this image?
- 2 From your own knowledge of the Terror, how accurate is it to blame the Terror and its victims on Robespierre alone?

◀ **Source 15.16** Jules Perrin's etching of Robespierre as architect of the Terror, shown here with the guillotines labelled but without the explanatory caption.



## 15.6 Recent views of Robespierre

Robespierre continues to fascinate and divide eminent historians to this day. The debate about his role is still contested: was he a saviour of the French Revolution or a psychopathic dictator? Below are some contemporary views about the role Robespierre played in the revolution.

### KEY HISTORIAN



#### Ruth Scurr (1971–)

In 2006, Ruth Scurr attempted to explain Robespierre's political beliefs and behaviour by a psychological reading of his personality. She wrote:

*To his enemies – living and dead – he will always be coloured bright red: the first of the modern dictators, the inventor and perpetrator of the Terror who sent thousands to their deaths.*

**Source 15.17** Ruth Scurr, *Fatal Purity: Robespierre and the French Revolution*, 2006, p. 5

Scurr outlines how the idea of Robespierre's 'purity' is based on him living a very simple and principled life, and the working people lovingly nicknaming him 'The Incorruptible'. But she proposes that looking beyond Robespierre's way of life will show his deeper character traits. She finds a man who from childhood lacked emotional enrichment, and became cold and implacable, even fanatical. She concludes that by the time of the French Revolution, Robespierre believed in his mission to create a new society in France, 'to the point of insanity' (p. 5).



▲ **Source 15.18** Ruth Scurr

## KEY HISTORIAN

**Peter McPhee (1948–)**

Peter McPhee has also explored 'the Robespierre question' by seeking answers in Robespierre's childhood and youth. He began by posing a very open question:

*Was Robespierre the first modern dictator, inhuman and fanatical, an obsessive who used his political power to try to impose his rigid ideal of a land of Spartan [strictly disciplined] 'virtue'? Or was he a principled, self-abnegating [self-sacrificing] visionary, the great revolutionary master who succeeded in leading the French Revolution and the republic to safety in the face of overwhelming military odds?*

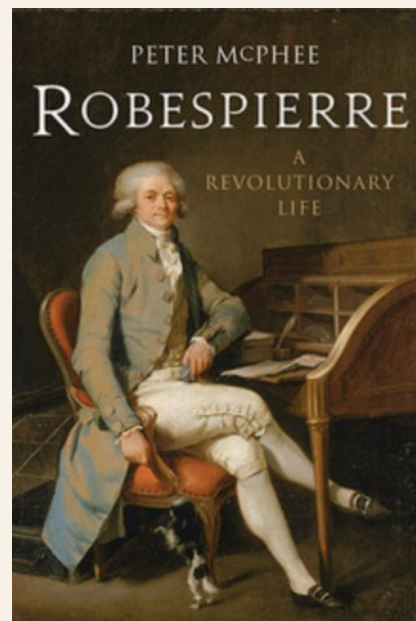
**Source 15.19** *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life*, 2012, p. xvi

McPhee found no sign of the emotionless fanatic described by Scurr in Robespierre's early life and family background. On the contrary, McPhee found a sentient individual, capable of emotion and much loved by those around him. McPhee believes that Robespierre cannot possibly have come to the French Revolution with a tyrant's desire to kill.

Indeed, in October 1789, Robespierre had opposed the decree on martial law, which was hardly the actions of a would-be dictator. And as late as 1791, Robespierre had written a passionate essay against capital punishment. McPhee therefore argues that the forces of revolutionary history, not personality, pushed Robespierre to approve the successive stages of the Terror. McPhee notes that Robespierre had to be persuaded, most unwillingly, to join the Committee of Public Safety and, in that role, he tended to remove people's names from lists rather than add more.

McPhee concludes that neither Robespierre nor his colleagues ever directly condemned a single person to death; instead, they compiled lists of suspects to be interrogated by the Revolutionary Tribunal.

Nonetheless, Robespierre remains one of France's most disliked public figures; McPhee cites a survey done in the bicentenary year of the French Revolution (1989), where people were shown to dislike Robespierre more even than they disliked Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette. Other authors, McPhee reminds us, have likened Robespierre to Stalin, Mao and even to Hitler.



▲ **Source 15.20** Left: Peter McPhee. Right: McPhee's *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life* (2012)

15.7

SIGNIFICANT INDIVIDUAL



**Georges-Jacques Danton (1759–1794)**

Georges-Jacques Danton had a complex and fascinating revolutionary career. Trained in law, he bluffed and bribed his way into a legal practice, finally achieving a position as advocate to royal councils in 1787. A passionate reader of the *philosophes*, he became the centre of radical discussion when he married the daughter of the owner of the famous Procope Café, a gathering place for patriots.



▲ Source 15.21 A sketch of Danton by Jacques Louis David

Danton found his path in politics through local rather than national politics: in October 1789, he was president of his local Paris section. His imposing presence and fiery skills as an orator made him an ideal democratic leader, and he won an enormous popular following when he defended the radical Marat against attacks.

In 1790, Danton joined the radical revolutionaries who formed the Cordeliers Club; henceforth, he sided with the most popular and radical causes. In 1791, he defended the crowd's actions in preventing the king from going to Saint-Cloud and attacked Lafayette for allegedly helping the royal family to escape.

By 1792, Danton was one of a few deputies who opposed the war, but once the emergency of 1792–93 began, he emerged as an organiser of war measures and as the architect of government by Terror. As a revolutionary leader, he was a complex and often contradictory figure, and his career was for some time sullied by rumours of financial malpractice – including, at the very least, embezzlement of government money and possibly acceptance of more dubious funds.

By 1793–94, Danton's advocacy of the abandonment of Terror brought him into conflict with Robespierre, which was a controversy that resulted in his execution in 1794.

(Refer to the electronic version of this book for a more detailed biography of Danton.)



▲ Source 15.22 An engraving of Danton giving a speech

## 15.8

## SIGNIFICANT INDIVIDUAL



## Jean-Paul Marat (1743–1793)

Jean-Paul Marat was practising as a doctor when the revolution occurred. As early as 1789, he had adopted the radical, populist stance that would characterise his brief, violent revolutionary career. While leaders such as Lafayette and Robespierre exerted their influence to control and direct the popular movement, Marat did his utmost to encourage popular militancy.

Marat founded his radical newspaper, *The Friend of the People*, in 1789, and by 1791 was associated with the Jacobins. He appealed to the *sans-culottes* movement, encouraging their claim to direct democracy and urging the government to greater ferocity against the enemies of the revolution.

Marat provides a fascinating example of a revolutionary leader who was more revolutionary than the revolution itself. Politically he was a loose cannon and dangerous because his extremist statements inflamed the situation to boiling point. He was, in fact, more useful to the Jacobins after he was murdered by Charlotte Corday in 1793; the Jacobins transformed Marat into a martyr for the republic of virtue (a sort of secular saint) without having to fear his fiery denunciations.

(Refer to the electronic version of this book for a more detailed biography of Marat.)



▲ **Source 15.23** This portrait of Marat by Boze captures the features of the politician, who was said to be the ugliest man in Paris.

► **Source 15.24** In this scene depicted by Lesueur, Marat is held on the shoulders of the people.



## THE STORY SO FAR



Robespierre came to power at a time of general crisis and used emergency measures to deal effectively with it. In other countries and other times, these would be called war-emergency measures. Nonetheless, the measures of revolutionary government did involve the abuse of civic rights – one of the earliest ideals of the revolution – and involved actions that ultimately would threaten revolutionaries of all shades of opinion. While few historians would dispute Robespierre's view of a need for unity, most ask whether it is really necessary for revolutions to destroy their own political 'children'.

Use the QR code or visit the **Interactive Textbook** and watch the video summarising the chapter.





## Develop your historical-thinking skills

### Using historical terms meaningfully

Write an extended paragraph analysing the role of Robespierre in the French Revolution. To what extent was he the principled politician and national saviour that historian Peter McPhee describes? To what extent was he the power-hungry dictator described by historian Ruth Scurr? Use the following phrases and terms to show you understand their meaning and context:

- Robespierre's political beliefs
- revolutionary government
- Committee of Public Safety
- The Incorruptible
- professional revolutionary.

### Establishing historical significance

Using four or five main points, explain what special skills or qualities Robespierre offered the revolution at its time of greatest crisis in 1793.

### Constructing historical arguments

'The quality of a great leader is not just to state political beliefs and principles, but to know when and how to change them in response to a developing revolutionary situation'. To what extent is this true of Robespierre?

### Using quotes as evidence

Write a sentence using a short phrase from one of the quotes below or contrast the views from a few of the quotes. You can also use any of the quotes in the chapter. Any quotes you choose can be used directly or paraphrased into your own words.

*We shall distinguish in Robespierre two men, the apostle of liberty, and Robespierre the most infamous of tyrants.*

**Gracchus Babeuf, radical revolutionary**

*You will follow us soon! Your house will be beaten down and salt sown in the place where it stood!*

**Georges Danton, as he passes Robespierre's home on the way to the guillotine**

*It is impossible to pronounce the word 'guillotine' without associating with it its grand mover, Robespierre.*

**Peter McPhee, historian**

*Maximilien, with all his faults, which were many, was one of the half-dozen major prophets of democracy.*

**R. R. Palmer, historian**

## Analysing historian's interpretations

### David Garrioch (1955–)

In 2002, historian David Garrioch wrote of Robespierre:

*Robespierre remains a controversial figure because he embodies [represents] the contradictions not only of the French Revolution, but of every country that feels itself to be under siege; and of every leader who must make decisions that pit idealism against pragmatism ... Until 1792, he opposed the death penalty, and after that advocated it only for treason. [During 1793] Robespierre betrayed most of the principles he stood for. The staunch opponent of capital punishment sent hundreds to the guillotine. The defender of the rights of man suspended civil and political liberties. The spokesman for religious toleration persecuted priests and nuns ... Faced with military defeat and the loss of all they had hoped for and fought for, he and his colleagues set the nation and their vision of the revolution above civil liberties. Let us defeat our enemies first, they argued, by any means necessary. Then human rights and freedom will be secure.*

Source 15.25 'The Road to the Guillotine', *The Age*, 21 August 2002



▲ Source 15.26 David Garrioch

- 1 What does David Garrioch see as the great contradiction of the French Revolution in the period 1792–94?
- 2 In what ways is it fair to say that Robespierre was pragmatic, in the sense that he changed his own principles to deal with the practical realities of the emergency situation?
- 3 Does Garrioch seem to agree with historians who argue that the seriousness of the situation in 1792–93 justified emergency measures?



# 16

## THE ROLE OF THE SANS-CULOTTES IN THE FRENCH REVOLUTION, 1792–95

*[The sans-culottes] were clerks and tradesmen, lawyers and goldsmiths, bakers and merchants: a crowd of fighting patriots, not a rabble.*

– DAVID DOWD, 1965



## Overview

To understand the French Revolution properly, we must realise how powerful, and dangerous, the popular revolutionary movement was. The urban working people, now calling themselves *sans-culottes*, formed large, militant crowds capable of controlling whole sections of Paris. They developed their own identity and clear demands about material issues, such as bread prices. While revolutionary leaders such as Robespierre could influence them, no leader could claim to control them.



Another important aspect of this movement is that it was radicalising, developing extreme policies in bodies such as the Paris section meetings and the Paris Commune. Dangerous as the *sans-culottes* were, Robespierre understood that the government needed working people's support during the war emergency. Accordingly, Robespierre granted many *sans-culottes'* demands for economic measures, such as fixed food prices.

## Key issues

- Who were the *sans-culottes*?
- What was the relationship between the Jacobins and the *sans-culottes*?
- Who were the enraged ones?

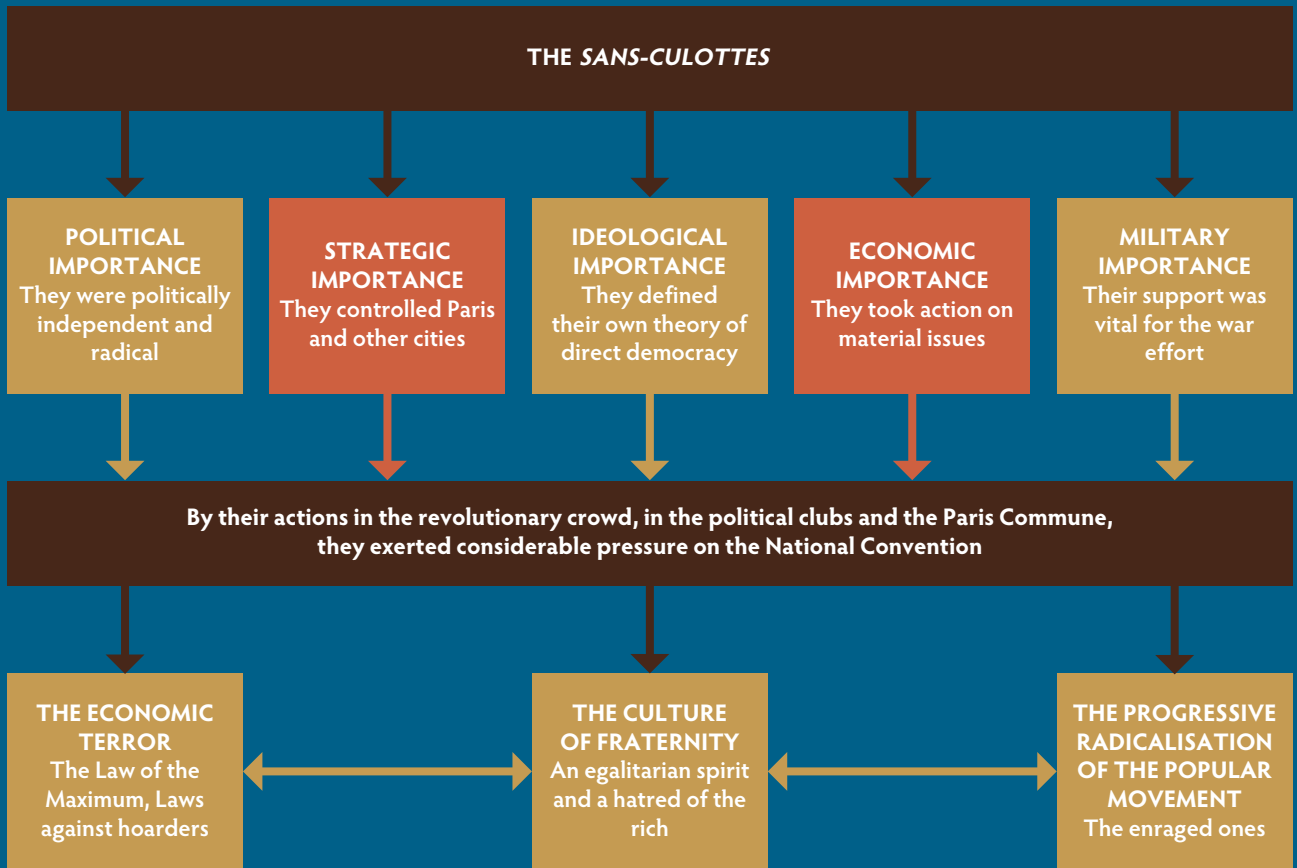
## Digital resources for this chapter

In the *Interactive Textbook*:

-  video and audio sources and questions
-  digital activities.

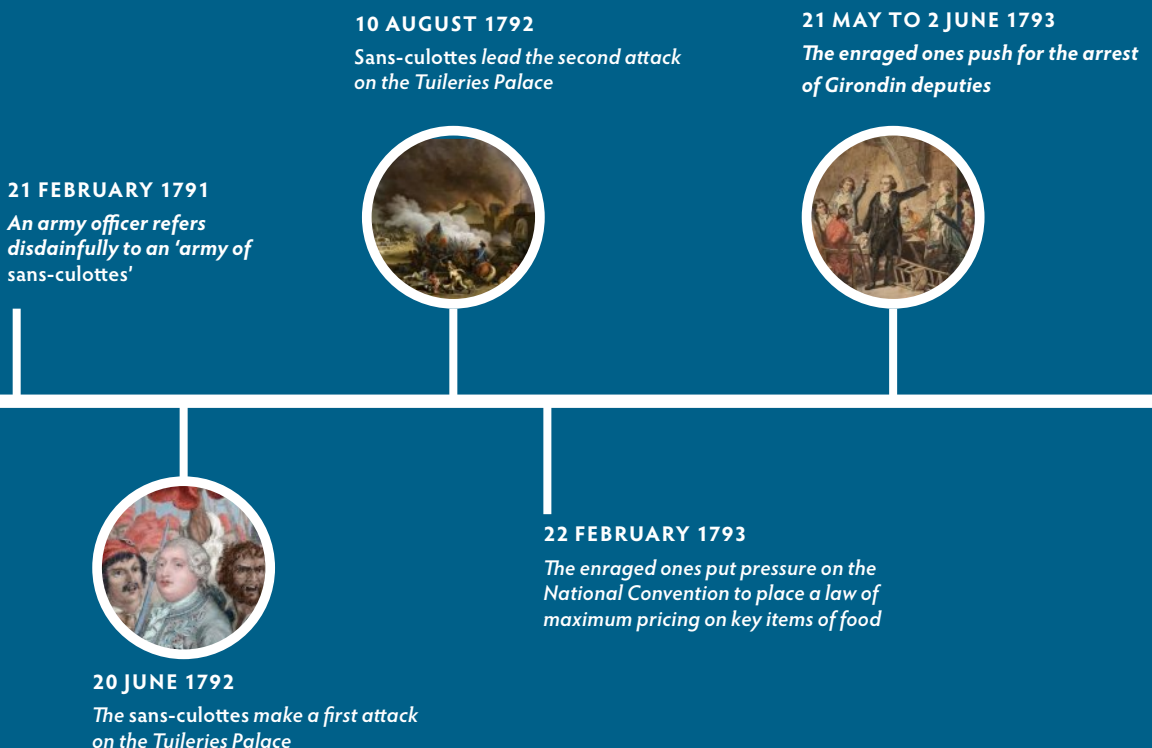
◀ **Source 16.0** This painting by Louis-Léopold Boilly does not show an actual *sans-culotte*, but an actor dressed as one. In 1792–94, working people were made the heroes of many popular plays.

# Flow of chapter



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# Chapter timeline



## 16.1 Who were the *sans-culottes*?

Originally *sans-culottes* meant ordinary people who did not wear stylish clothing, such as the aristocratic knee breeches (*culottes*) or even plain trousers (the *pantalon*). During the French Revolution, the term was adopted by working people who were proud to be ordinary folk. The adoption of a name is often a landmark in the process of self-identification; that is, when people become aware of themselves as a social group and are able to state their needs and concerns.

The *sans-culottes* were not a party or a club, or even a formal organisation – the term was just a general name for the militant working-class movement. They were not a single class, but a broad alliance ranging from poor labourers through to artisans, master artisans, shopkeepers and even lesser professions.

The *sans-culottes'* main aim as a political force was to pressure the government into taking action on material problems like the price of food. Their main technique was direct democracy – that is, the use of crowd action to exert pressure on the government. Their main strength was in their tradition of militant action (they were very good at controlling the capital) and, later, the fact that their support would be crucial to the war effort.

The *sans-culottes* were broadly a movement that was radicalising so quickly during the French Revolution that even the Jacobins struggled to keep up with them.



▲ Source 16.1 This painting is a representation of the Parisian *sans-culottes* on guard to protect the revolution from its enemies.



◀ Source 16.2 This representation by Lesueur shows the broad range of social types who comprised the *sans-culottes*, including labourers, artisans, shopkeepers and minor professionals.



◀ **Source 16.3** This engraving is a representation of the revolutionary culture of the *sans-culottes*. They expressed themselves through a preference for simple clothing, revolutionary loyalty (wearing *tricolore* decorations such as sashes and cockades), song (the bloodthirsty '*Ça Ira!*'), dance (the Carmagnole dance, shown here) and symbols (the liberty tree). This image also makes it clear that the *sans-culottes* knew how necessary they were to the revolution: on the right, their first great triumph, the Bastille, bristling with guns, is captured; on the left, the Austrian army flees in panic at the sight of them.

KEY HISTORIAN



**Albert Soboul (1914–1982)**

Albert Soboul was a Professor of the French Revolution at the Sorbonne University in Paris; he was the leading expert in revolutionary studies in his time. While his overall interpretation of the French Revolution has since been corrected by later historians, his ground-breaking achievement was to find a way of bringing the anonymous working people of Paris back into history.

Until Soboul, the *sans-culottes* were known only as a mass – the 'mob' or 'revolutionary crowd' – and our perception of them was based largely on popular novels and films. The reason for this is that working people do not leave as many letters, diaries and memoirs as do middle-class people; many are too busy to write and some are unable to do so. Therefore, the *sans-culottes* are the voiceless people of French revolutionary history.

Soboul was a Marxist and member of the Communist Party; he was convinced that he should use his skills to reveal who the *sans-culottes* really were and how they contributed to the French Revolution. Soboul studied under the great Georges Lefebvre, another historian who had led the way in delving into the hidden lives of working people. This is now known as 'history from below', and it was, literally, a revelation. Soboul and Lefebvre developed new methods of deep archival research to actually define who the *sans-culottes* were and what role they played.

Soboul delved deep into the archives and found that although relatively few records were made *by* the *sans-culottes*, many records were made *about* them. For example, after the attack on the Bastille, a list was made of the people who died in the fight that included their names, addresses and professions. Assuming that this was a reliable cross-section of a revolutionary crowd, a startling picture emerged: the 'mob' was not made up of the starving poor or of murderous criminals, but of a spectrum of quite respectable working citizens, ranging from day labourers, to skilled artisans, to master artisans and even to lower middle-class professions such as shopkeepers and dentists. Soboul then focused especially on the role of the *sans-culottes* during the emergency of 1792–94, and argued that their action in support of the Jacobins saved the revolution from defeat.

Soboul's contention that the Terror was necessary has since been hotly contested by historians, but his discovery of the 'true' working classes has transformed our understanding of the French Revolution forever.

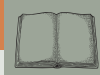
## 16.2 The Jacobins and the *sans-culottes*

Apart from their new sense of identity, the *sans-culottes* enjoyed great power because they knew that the Jacobin government could not survive without their support.



▲ Source 16.4 These engravings from c. 1793–94 depict the *sans-culottes* in a wholesome, positive light.

### ANALYSIS ACTIVITY 16.1: READING A PRIMARY SOURCE



#### Working people define their identity

The following extract, written in April 1793, is a reply to the impertinent question: What is a *sans-culotte*?

*A sans-culotte, you rogues? He is an individual who always goes on foot, who has no millions as you all wish to have ... and who lives quite simply with his wife and children, if he has any, on the fourth and the fifth floor. He is useful, for he knows how to plough a field, to work a forge, to saw and file, to roof or make shoes, and how to pour out his blood to the last for the safety of the republic ... In the evening, he presents himself to his section meeting [local political meeting]. Moreover, a sans-culotte always keeps his sword sharp to split the skulls of the malevolent. Sometimes he parades with his pike; but, at the first sound of the drum, you see him leave for the Vendée, or for the army of the North ...*

Source 16.5 Quoted in D.I. Wright (ed.), *The French Revolution*, 1974, p. 171

- 1 How does this document show that the *sans-culottes* possessed a strong sense of identity in themselves?
- 2 Why was the support of the *sans-culottes* useful, even necessary, to the government at this time?



## How did revolutionary leaders communicate with the popular movement?

While working people were defining their identity and grievances, a second process was accelerating the development of their self-awareness. Most revolutionary leaders were bourgeois lawyers or government officials and many were not democratically minded. A few, such as radical journalists who had a better understanding of the lives of the working classes, gathered in April 1790 to form the Society of the Friends of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, later called the 'Cordeliers Club', after the building in which they met.

The members were genuinely radical thinkers and included people like Danton, Desmoulins, Marat, Brissot and Hébert. They were democratic, enjoyed strong relationships with the working people of Paris, had strong links with the local suburban meetings of Paris (the sections) and could quickly summon up a crowd. Members of this group were radically opposed to the active-passive citizen division that deprived many working people of the vote, and they demanded the revision of the Constitution of 1791 for near-universal (male) suffrage. They also supported direct democracy and the **right to insurrection**, by which working people could attack the government if it was not defending their interests.

### right to insurrection

working people can overthrow the government if it is not defending their interests

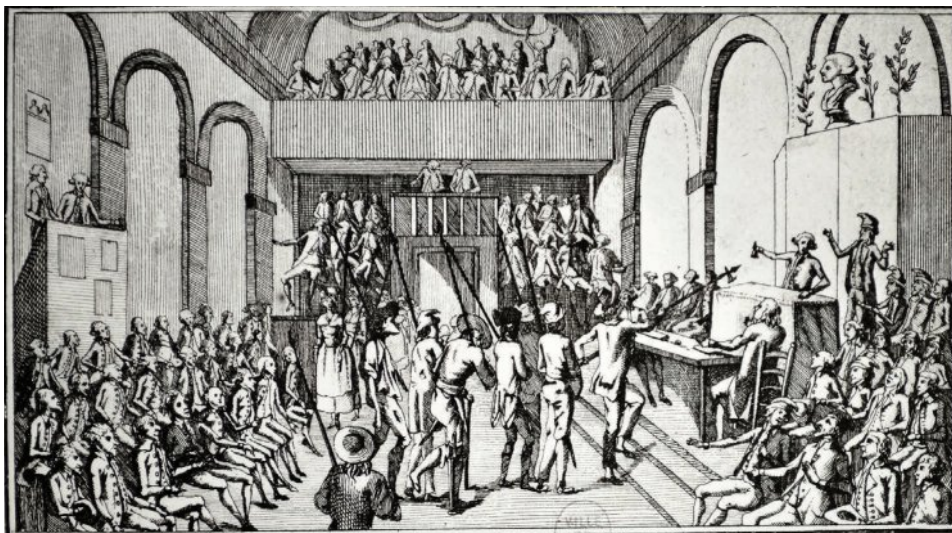
Finally, the members of the Cordeliers Club ferociously opposed privilege and wealth in all its forms, hoping to hound out anybody who abused their power or who threatened the great principles of 1789. This was an early vigilante movement, with the eye of vigilance as its symbol. Originally a club of prosperous bourgeois, it progressively drew in working people and, ultimately, women of all classes, introducing them to formal political debate and empowering them to express their grievances in political terminology. This is the true meaning of the word 'movement'; it is not simply a crowd supporting revolutionary action where necessary, but a powerful wave of popular energy that revolutionary leaders can ride, but never completely control.

### FOCUS QUESTIONS 16.1

- 1 Why and how did the popular movement become far more radical after 1792?
- 2 Why did the Jacobins feel that they needed the support of this radical popular movement and how did they win this support?

## Revolutionary ideas: Popular sovereignty and direct democracy

While the *sans-culottes* are best known for their insistence on material issues, they also developed radical political ideas. The concept of direct democracy provided a means of forcibly drawing their concerns about material problems, such as the price of food, to the attention of the National Assembly.



◀ Source 16.6 A group of *sans-culottes* make their claims at the National Assembly

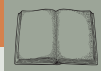
Historian Barrie Rose states that it was bourgeois deputies who created the representative National Assembly, but the popular movement in the Paris section meetings that created another, more direct, system of democracy. Since the popular movement presumed to legislate not only on local affairs but also national ones, it soon found itself in conflict with the National Assembly. Out of this conflict arose direct democracy, based partly on theory (Rousseau's idea that an individual's sovereignty can never be totally surrendered) and partly on fact (this was a grassroots democratic movement, and it had created venues of debate and executive committees all over Paris). With this came the theory of **permanent popular movement** – that is, the people will continually be actively involved in politics, meeting regularly at the popular level.

**permanent popular movement** people will continually be actively involved in politics, meeting regularly at the popular level

By 1790, radicals in the Cordeliers Club challenged the National Assembly's mandate to rule, demanding that laws under discussion also be submitted directly to the vast mass of voters, meeting in their local assemblies.

Between 1790 and 1792, Rose argues, people not only created the structures of direct democracy, but also an ethos; only the local assemblies, they argued, truly represented the revolutionary principles of equality and fraternity. However, there were contradictions – while local districts such as Saint-Etienne tried to further democratise local structures, others excluded poor citizens and all excluded women from formal participation. In July 1790, the National Assembly reduced some of the powers of the districts, but their role was continued by the many popular societies that had appeared.

### ANALYSIS ACTIVITY 16.2: READING A PRIMARY SOURCE



#### Revolutionary ideas: The right to insurrection

Below are four primary sources. Read each of them while thinking about the revolutionary idea of the right to insurrection. Then, answer the questions that follow.

##### Document 1: Rousseau on popular sovereignty

*Man was born free, and he is everywhere in chains ... Sovereignty cannot be represented, for the same reason that it cannot be alienated; its essence is the general will and cannot be represented ... Thus the people's deputies are not, and could not be, its representatives; they are merely its agents; and they cannot decide anything finally. Any law which the people has not ratified in person is void; it is not a law at all.*

Source 16.7 Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 1762, p. 141

##### Document 2: The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen

*The law is the expression of the General Will. All citizens have the right to take part in its formation in person or by their representatives.*

Source 16.8 Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, 1789, Article 6

##### Document 3: Robespierre on popular sovereignty

*Man is born for happiness and for liberty, and everywhere he is a slave and unhappy. The purpose of society is the conservation of his rights and the perfection of his being, and everywhere society degrades and oppresses him. Government is established to make the general will respected; but men who govern have individual wills, and every will seeks to dominate. If they use for this purpose the public force with which they are armed, the government is nothing but a scourge of liberty. Conclude, then, that the first objective of every constitution must be to defend public and individual liberty against the government itself. Pose first this incontestable maxim: that the people are good and that their delegates are corruptible; that it is to the virtue and the sovereignty of the people that we must look for safeguards against the vices and despotism of government.*

Source 16.9 From Robespierre, speech on the principles of government, 10 May 1793, in Paul Beik (ed.), *The French Revolution*, 1970, pp. 255–9



ANALYSIS ACTIVITY 16.2: CONTINUED



**Document 4: The Constitution of 1793**

*Article 32: The right to present petitions to the depositaries of public authority may not be forbidden, suspended or limited under any circumstances.*

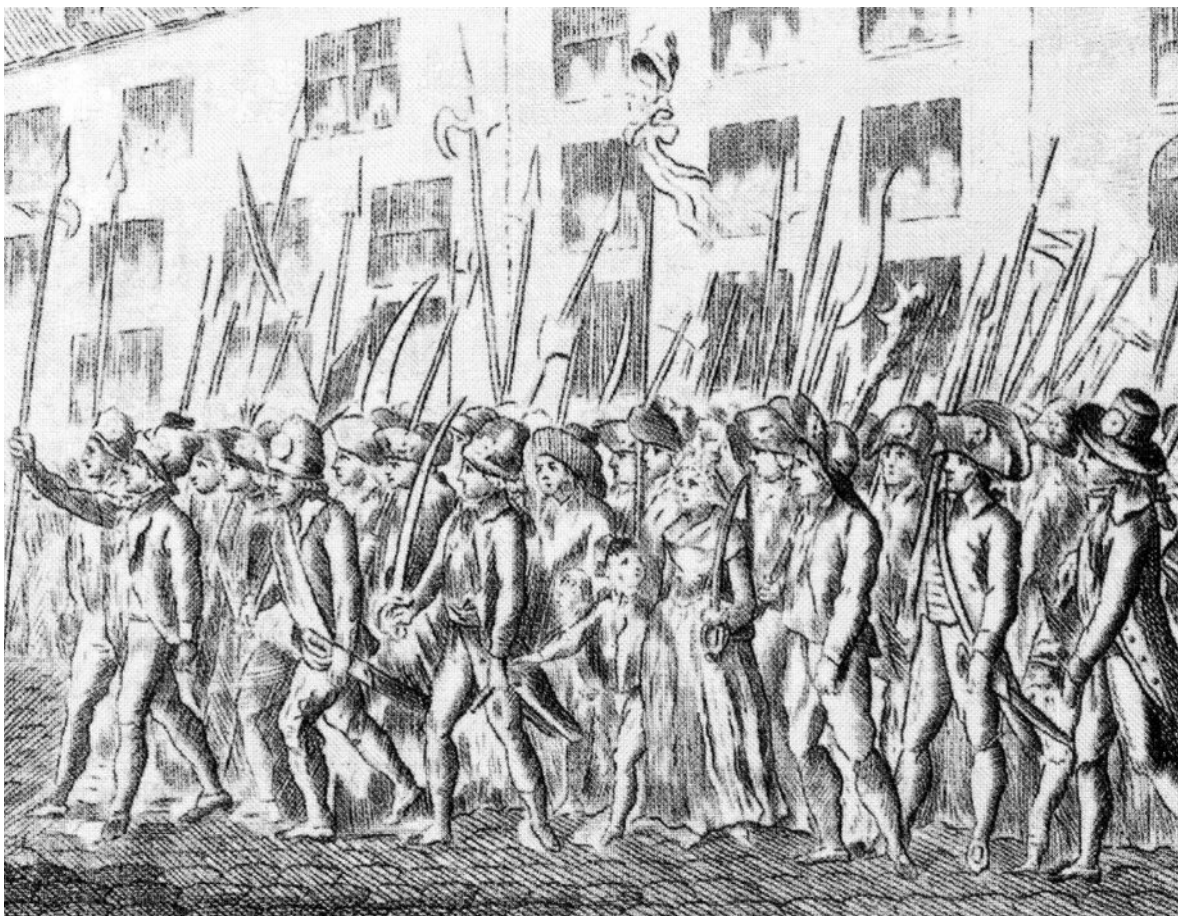
*Article 33: Resistance to oppression is the consequence of the other rights of man.*

*Article 34: There is oppression against the social body when a single one of its members is repressed.*

*Article 35: When the government violates the rights of the people, insurrection is the most sacred of rights and the most indispensable of duties for the people and for each portion thereof.*

**Source 16.10** Quoted in D.I. Wright (ed.), *The French Revolution*, 1974, p. 174

- 1 To what extent was Rousseau the initiator of the idea of direct democracy? (Document 1)
- 2 What form of democracy is referred to in Article 6 of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen? (Document 2)
- 3 On what points do Robespierre's theories echo those of Rousseau? (Document 3)
- 4 Did the Constitution of 1793 specifically and explicitly allow for direct democracy? If so, on what grounds? (Document 4)



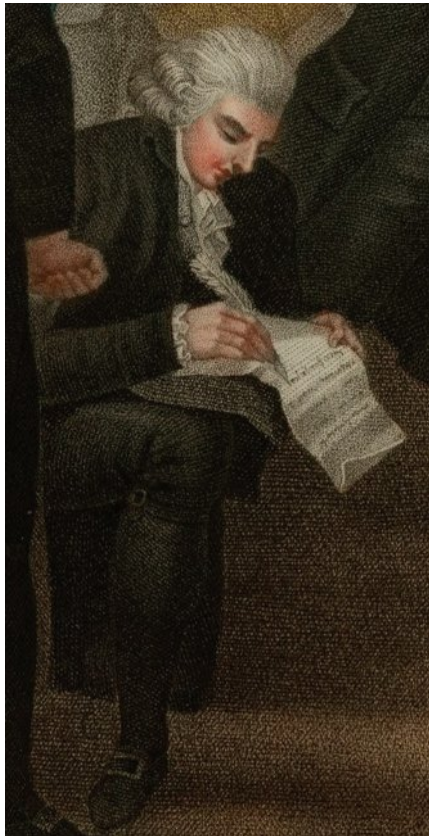
▲ **Source 16.11** As this artist observed, the revolutionary crowd was large, dynamic and absolutely in control of the streets. These are people from the working suburb of Saint-Antoine (near the Bastille), who are making their way to the Tuileries Palace and the National Assembly on 20 June 1792.



## 16.3 Who were the enraged ones?

The most important aspect of the political situation during 1792–94 was the radicalisation of the popular movement, threatening to leave the Jacobins behind. Other leaders and groups now appealed to the Parisian revolutionary crowd. The Jacobins feared they would lose their popular support to others. The practice of radical worker action was now strengthened by a theory of militant action.

The *sans-culottes* produced an ultra-radical group called the enraged ones (*les enragés*). Their leaders, Jacques Roux and Jean Varlet, aggressively demanded economic justice, calling for the execution of food hoarders. They hated all wealthy people and even suggested some redistribution of property. These ultra-radical workers were so militant that they could not be tamed by any political group. The popular movement moved to the left, threatening both the Jacobins, who felt they led the popular movement, and even the Paris Commune, which was the organising body of the militant working classes.



### FOCUS QUESTIONS 16.2

- 1 How do we know that the popular movement was becoming so radical that even the Jacobins were losing control of it?
- 2 Why did the theories of the enraged ones frighten most bourgeois deputies?

◀ **Source 16.12** The enraged ones were an ultra-radical group of *sans-culottes*. On the left is Jacques Roux, one of the leaders who radicalised the group, while on the right is a cartoon from 1793 critical of such people.

### THE STORY SO FAR

The history of the French Revolution is not the history of the brutal mob, but the history of a rational, thinking revolutionary crowd. Between 1792 and 1794, the Parisian crowd developed into an independent force, creating its own name and its own identity, material grievances, political theory and form of militant action. It worked by violence or the threat of it. Briefly, until the war emergency was over, the popular movement enjoyed a high level of popular involvement and power, successfully forcing the National Convention to take practical measures to solve working people's material problems.

Use the QR code or visit the Interactive Textbook and watch the video summarising the chapter.





## Develop your historical-thinking skills

### Using historical terms meaningfully

Write an extended paragraph analysing the role of the *sans-culottes* in the French Revolution. What was the real social make-up of this popular revolutionary movement? What contribution, if any, did they make to the revolution? Use the following phrases and terms to show you understand their meaning and context:

- *sans-culottes*
- social types in the movement
- direct democracy
- right to insurrection
- Constitution of 1793
- Paris section meetings
- the enraged ones.

### Establishing historical significance

Using four or five main points, explain how and why the popular movement became a more radical and independent force in the period 1792–93.

### Constructing historical arguments

‘The relationship between the Jacobins and the *sans-culottes* was not so much a relationship of leaders and followers as of two allies; one a powerful political party, the other a powerful popular movement.’ To what extent do you think this statement is true? What were the dangers and problems of this alliance?

## Analysing historian's interpretations

### Simon Schama (1945– )

In his book *Citizens*, historian Simon Schama provides a vivid account of the French Revolution. Much of his research focuses on the violence of the revolution. In his conclusion, he writes:

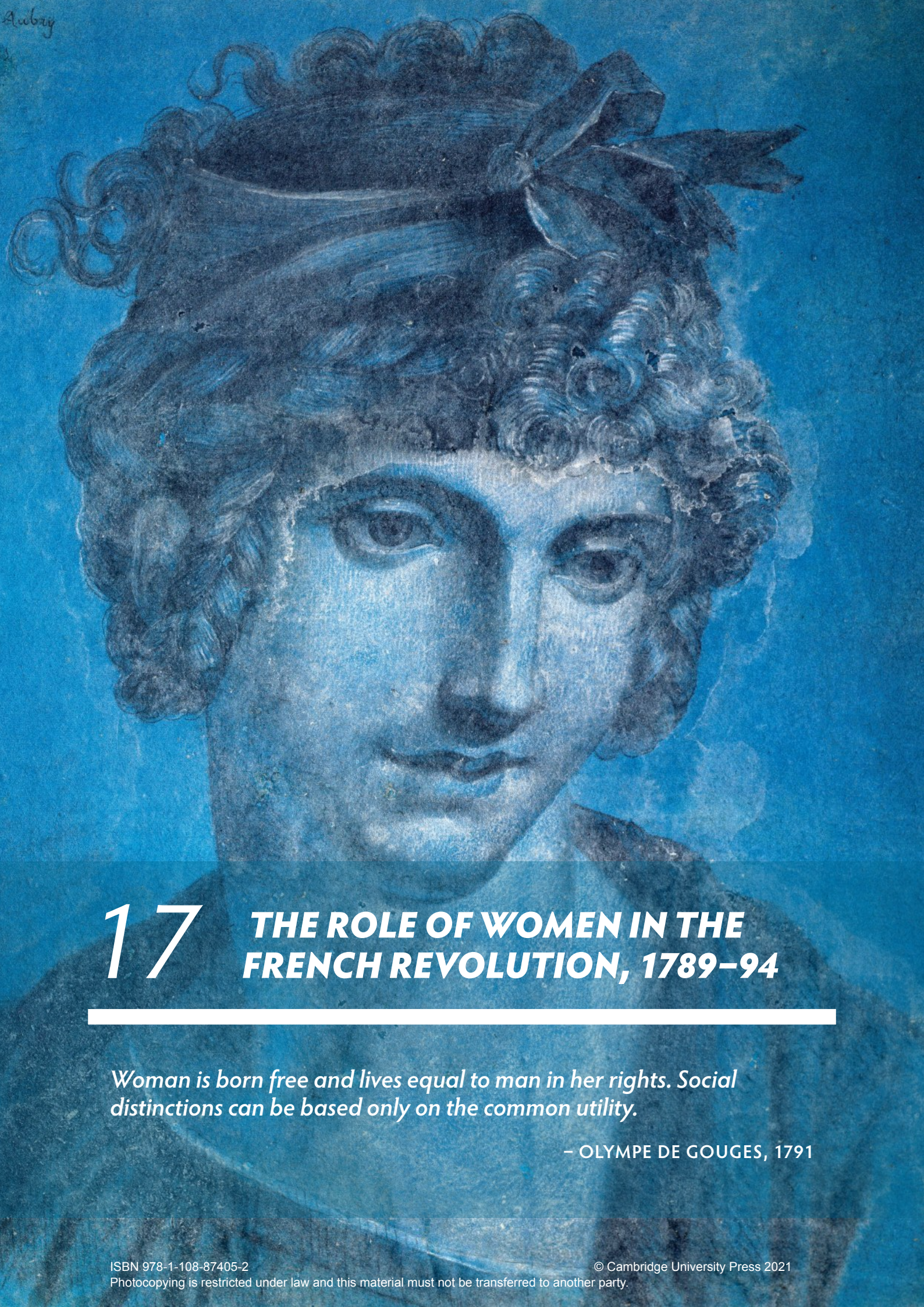
*Why was the French Revolution [so violent]? Why, from the beginning, was it powered by brutality? Popular revolutionary violence was not some sort of boiling subterranean lava that finally forced its way onto the surface of French politics ... Perhaps it would be better to think of the revolutionary elite as rash geologists, themselves gouging open great holes in the crust of polite discourse and then feeding the angry matter through the pipes of their rhetoric out into the open.*

**Source 16.13** *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution*, 1989, p. 860



▲ **Source 16.14** Simon Schama

- 1 The French Revolution, like most revolutions, involved acts of violence. What is Schama's view of the role of violence in the French Revolution?
- 2 To what extent do you think that the French Revolution was 'powered by brutality'?
- 3 Can you offer any other explanations than brutality for outbreaks of revolutionary violence such as the September massacres?



# 17 THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE FRENCH REVOLUTION, 1789–94

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*Woman is born free and lives equal to man in her rights. Social distinctions can be based only on the common utility.*

– OLYMPE DE GOUGES, 1791

## Overview

The history of great events such as revolutions is too often only the story of men's actions and achievements. While women were definitely present in revolutionary events, frequently their contributions have been ignored. Feminist historians seek to remind us of all that has been forgotten in this way.



If we acknowledge that women were present in revolutionary crowds, we generally assume they were there for material reasons, such as the cost of bread and other foods. This is not the whole truth, however. During the revolution, French women also had their first experience of popular political involvement. Some women argued specifically for women's rights in important theoretical statements. Later, women were excluded from the political life of the revolution. Nonetheless, these pioneers began a discussion that inspired French feminism in the nineteenth century.

## Key issues

- The historical debate – why did women participate in the revolution?
- How do we discover the political action of revolutionary women?
- What caused the radicalisation of revolutionary women between 1792 and 1794?
- Who were some of the key women of the French Revolution?
- What did Olympe de Gouges say in her *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen*?
- How effective were activists such as Pauline Léon and Claire Lacombe?
- Why were revolutionary women excluded from the revolution in the period 1794–95?

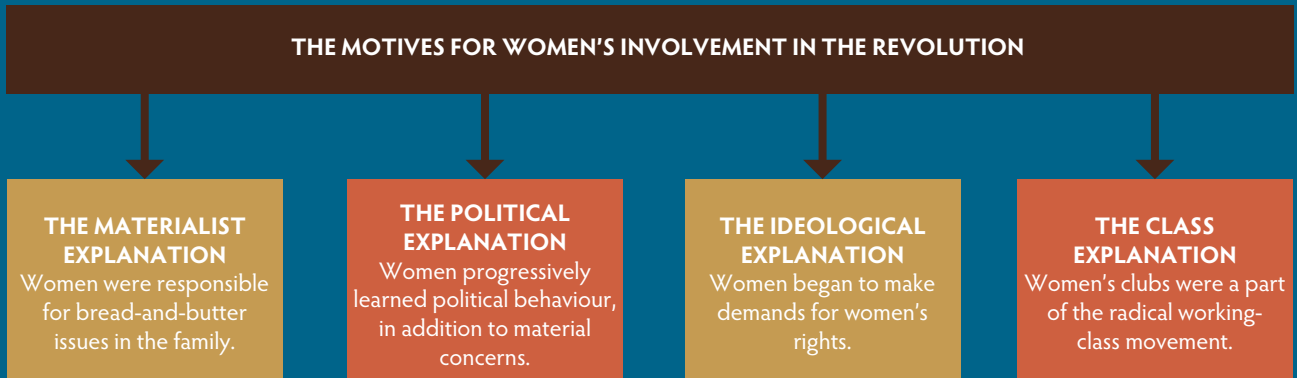
## Digital resources for this chapter

In the *Interactive Textbook*:

-  Video and audio sources and questions
-  Digital activities.

◀ Source 17.0 A portrait of Olympe de Gouges c. 1784

# Flow of chapter



# Chapter timeline

**7 SEPTEMBER 1789**

*Jewels given to the National Assembly by group of women artists*



**1791**

*Olympe de Gouges publishes her Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen*



**MAY 1793**

*The Society of Revolutionary Republican Women is founded*



**17 JUNE 1791**

*Pauline Léon is prevented from participating in the Champ de Mars demonstration*

**NOVEMBER 1793**

*Olympe de Gouges is tried for treason and guillotined*



**5-6 OCTOBER 1789**

*The women's march on Versailles*

## 17.1 The contribution of women and their involvement in revolutionary activity

In September 1789, the all-male members of the National Assembly heard a knock on the door of their hall. A group of educated bourgeois women entered the political space to express their support by donating their jewels to the work of the revolution. These women did not challenge the all-male assembly; they merely made a gesture of support, inspired by a similar action by women in ancient Rome. However, their loyal gesture must have raised the question of how 50 per cent of the population – women – could relate to a revolution that did not allow them to participate formally in politics.



◀ **Source 17.1** This engraving shows a group of women donating their jewels to the National Assembly.

The deputies themselves were aware of the contradiction central to their revolution. Following Rousseau, their *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* stated that rights were ‘natural’ and ‘universal’, applying automatically and without exception to *all* human beings.



◀ **Source 17.2** These engravings, *The Great Injustice* and *The Great Justice*, translate patriot principles into the form of female figures. In the first, the Third Estate ‘carries’ the two privileged estates; in the second, the situation has been reversed.

We can see them struggling with this contradiction in images such as *The Great Injustice* and *The Great Justice*, shown in Source 17.2, in which the classic image of the Third Estate carrying the two privileged estates on its back – usually represented by male figures – is translated into female figures. This can be done easily enough in images, but less easily in real political life. The female patriots of the French Revolution had first to *demand* rights for women and then struggle to *gain* them.

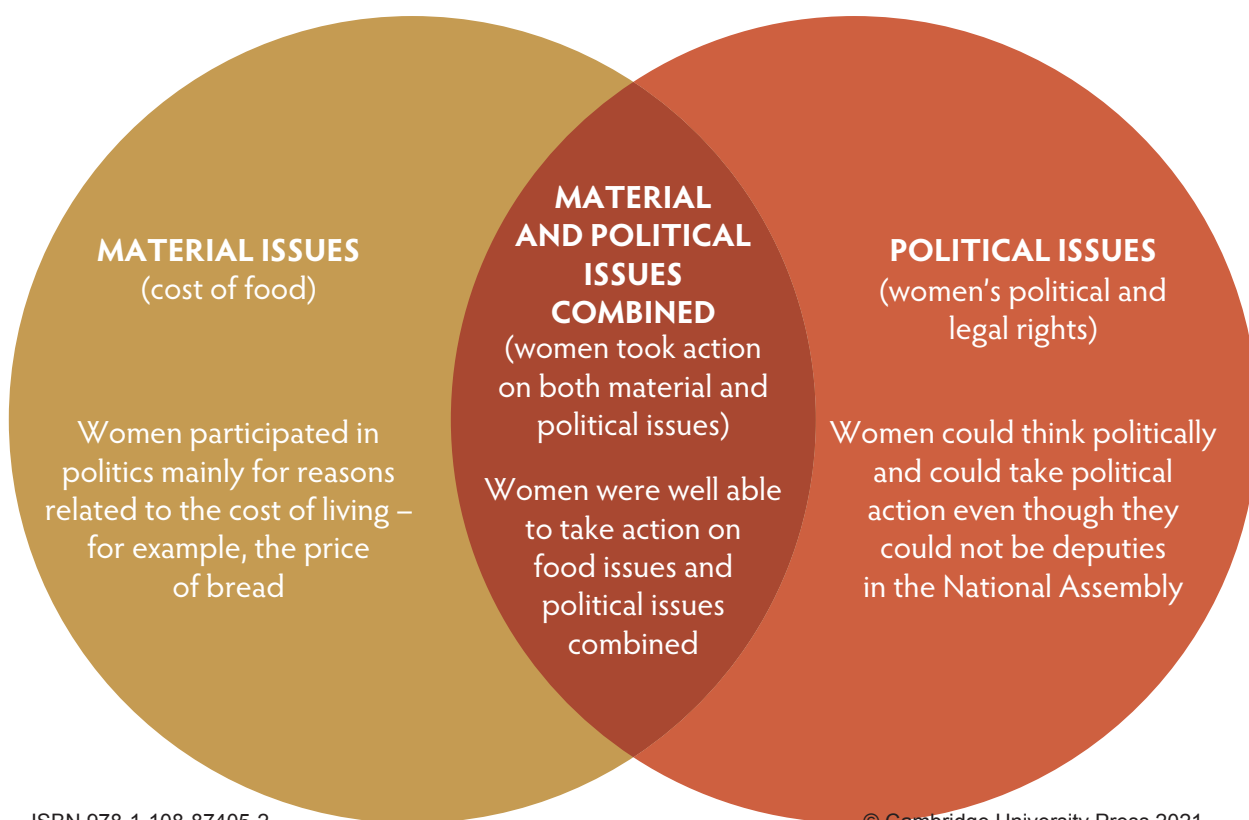
## 17.2 Why did women participate in the revolution?

There is no doubt that women did participate extensively in the French Revolution at all levels, but there is debate about why they acted. The big question is whether working women participated mainly for subsistence issues, like the price of basic foods, or acted for broader principles, such as women’s political and legal rights.

Feminist historian Olwen Hufton discovered that working women in the eighteenth century were certainly very important to keeping the economy of the household running. This went far beyond just housekeeping; women actually had more techniques for earning money than men did. When the revolution occurred, working women still had the main responsibility to keep their households provided with basic foods. They therefore had to let the (all-male) middle-class deputies of the National Assembly know what was important to women and the family.

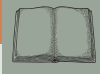
This issue must be placed in a broader historical debate about the role of women. For feminist historian Sheila Rowbotham, the main reason why women participated in the revolution was subsistence issues; that is, working women supported the revolution for the same reasons men did.

Feminist historian Dominique Godineau disagrees. Her research shows that although food issues were important, women were also aware of political issues and civic rights. She found that women took three different types of action. The first was action on purely *subsistence* issues, such as the price of food. The second was for purely *political* reasons, such as women’s rights. But the most common action was for *combined* subsistence issues and political issues in the same protest. Below is a Venn diagram of historians’ opinions on women’s revolutionary action.





## ANALYSIS ACTIVITY 17.1: READING A PRIMARY SOURCE



### Revolutionary women state their grievances

Below is an extract of a speech made by a revolutionary woman addressing the National Convention on 24 February 1793:

*Legislators, the laundresses of Paris have come into this sacred sanctuary of the laws and justice to set forth their concerns. Not only are all the essential foodstuffs being sold at excessive prices, but also the price of raw materials used in bleaching have become high ... It is not that materials are lacking; they are abundant; it is hoarding and speculation which drive up the price. You have made the head of the tyrant fall under the blade of the laws; let the laws bear down on the heads of these public bloodsuckers. We ask the death penalty for hoarders and speculators.*

**Source 17.3** Extract from a speech addressing the National Convention on 24 February 1793

The National Convention's president replied:

*Revolutionary women, the Convention will occupy itself with the object of your concern, but one of the ways of driving up the price of goods is to scare away commerce by constantly crying 'Hoarding!' etc.*

**Source 17.4** Quoted in D.G. Levy et al., *Women in Revolutionary Paris, 1789–1795*, 1979, p. 131

- 1 What does this document tell us about the main concerns of women of the working class in 1793?
- 2 From what you know of the French Revolution, how were demands like this one translated into the economic Terror?

## 17.3 Rediscovering the many political roles of women

For Godineau, women were political because they were everywhere involved in revolutionary discussion. Although they could not vote or be elected deputies, they could attend popular societies and the debates of the National Convention. Although many women did not write pamphlets, they were involved in other ways, such as political discussions or spying on their neighbourhood.



◀ **Source 17.5** This painting by Lesueur shows an early women's club, but this representation suggests it was a tame little gathering. In reality, women enjoyed having a political voice and debates were often fiery.

**popular sovereignty** the right to be involved in political life

**local vigilantes** people who keep watch for unlawful activity

In these subtle ways, Godineau says, women were asserting their **popular sovereignty**, which was more important than subsistence issues. Strangely, although women had not been granted citizens' political rights, they still took action to defend the revolution that excluded them. Godineau notes that women were only excluded from formal political life, such as being a deputy. They could, and did, involve themselves in politics in many other ways. They demanded the right to organise and to bear arms. They boldly dared to comment on revolutionary politics and to agree or disagree with men's decisions. As the revolution struggled with internal enemies, women also became **local vigilantes**; they attended executions, where the crowd 'supervised' the destruction of internal enemies, in the same way as the men fighting at the borders destroyed external enemies. In the same way, their attendance at popular clubs was a form of popular local vigilance.

Like most feminist historians, Godineau argues that women take action in different ways from men. For example, women began to speak informally on political issues in public places. Women also had real influence in the form of exhorting – that is, urging men to take political action.



▲ **Source 17.6** This painting by Lesueur shows the range of ways in which women could participate in the life of the revolution. The woman on the far left 'has placed herself at the gates of the city and is distributing cockades, songs, flowers, ribbons and water to volunteers who are marching out to the Vendée'.

## The role of theorists

Although women's participation in revolutionary crowd action was important, the women's movement also needed theorists to argue that women deserved greater political and legal rights. The word 'feminism' did not actually appear in France until the 1830s, but the writers who demanded women's rights in the 1790s are seen by many historians as the pioneers who began the debate.

## 17.4

## SIGNIFICANT INDIVIDUAL



## Olympe de Gouges (1748–1793)

Marie-Olympe de Gouges was a leading intellectual and theorist. Brought up by a butcher who worked in the provincial town of Montauban, she secretly believed she was the illegitimate daughter of a local noble. She came to Paris in 1770, adopting the stylish name of Olympe de Gouges.



▲ **Source 17.7** This portrait of Olympe de Gouges is by Alexander Kucharsky.

She wrote an autobiographical novel (1784) and a play called *The Slavery of the Blacks* (1789). As political tensions rose, de Gouges also wrote a storm of pamphlets, such as her *Patriotic Remarks* (1788), which lashed out at the luxurious court at Versailles and high society generally.

Her writings were often politically moderate, defending the monarchy, but de Gouges called for measures of practical relief to help the poor. She also made claims for women that would later be called feminist. She demanded the right to divorce, and even suggested in her own *Social Contract* (1791) that traditional marriage could be replaced by an equal social contract signed by husband and wife. This was too much for people at the time, who called her 'an hysterical virago'.

In 1791, de Gouges found support for her beliefs in the Society of the Friends of Truth (also called 'The Social Circle'), run by Sophie de Condorcet. That year, she published her brilliant *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen*, which cleverly copied the more famous document of August 1789, claiming women's right to participate actively in politics.

*Article 1: All women are born free and are equal to men in their rights.*

*Article 2: The aim of all political gatherings is to protect the natural and unchangeable rights of men and women: these rights are liberty, the ownership of property, security and particularly the resistance to repression.*

*Article 6: Laws must express the general will, all citizens male and female must contribute, either personally or through their representatives, to their creation; the law must be equal for everybody; all male and female citizens, being equal before the law, must be equally eligible for all public honours, positions and employments, according to their abilities.*

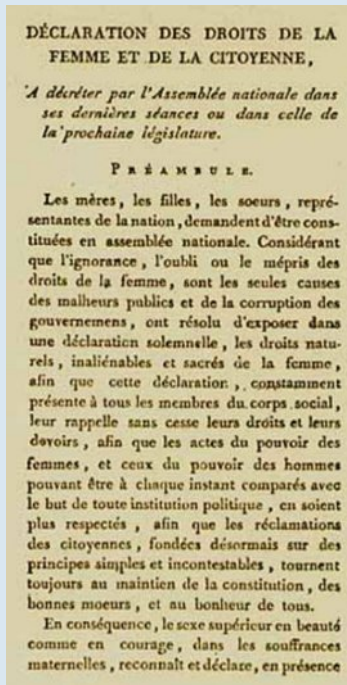
*Article 10: No person may be troubled for their opinions, even basic ones. Women have the right to mount the scaffold; they should equally have the right to mount the rostrum; providing such behaviour does not disturb the public order created by the law.*

**Source 17.8** Olympe de Gouges, *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen* (1791)

However, de Gouges did not like extreme political violence and was disgusted by the Terror. In December 1792, she helped defend Louis XVI. She opposed the Jacobins' centralisation of power in 1793 and published pamphlets condemning Robespierre as 'the egotistical abomination' of the revolution.

In July 1793, when de Gouges published a plan for a referendum to determine the new form of government in France, she provided Robespierre with an ideal excuse to arrest her for treason; she was guillotined in

November 1793. The official death notice mentioned not only the formal charge of sedition, but added that she had been punished 'for having forgotten the virtues which befit her sex'.



▲ **Source 17.9** Left: A watercolour of Olympe de Gouges. Right: The front page of the *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen*.

### FOCUS QUESTIONS 17.1

Carry out some further research on de Gouges. First, find a good primary source. You can gain a sense of her powerful style of writing by reviewing her work in the *Modern History Source Book* (<https://cambridge.edu.au/redirect/9095>). You can also read a good feminist analysis of de Gouges' importance to women's rights at <https://cambridge.edu.au/redirect/9096>.

### AMAZING BUT TRUE ...

Olympe de Gouges was a bold thinker. She even dared to suggest that there should be a National Assembly of women to work beside the National Assembly (of men). She famously said, 'Women have the right to mount the scaffold; they should equally have the right to mount the rostrum'.

## The role of activists

The women's movement in the French Revolution also needed leaders who could organise popular societies and initiate action to publicise women's demands. The stories of these activists clearly show that women *could* think and act politically, but they also prove that the revolution was not really ready to accept their ideas.

## Society of Revolutionary Republican Women

While some early 'feminist' theorists lacked a large popular following, other revolutionary women – such as Pauline Léon and Claire Lacombe – communicated better with working people. Historian Allan Todd

reminds us that their women's political club, the **Society of Revolutionary Republican Women** (founded in May 1793) was a radical female partner to the Jacobin Club.

Politically, the society supported the Montagnards against the Girondins, and helped in the attack on the National Convention to arrest the Girondins during 31 May to 2 June 1793. Socially, it supported the *sans-culottes* movement, had links with the radical Paris section meetings and, later, backed the extreme left-wing group known as the enraged ones. With such credibility, the society attracted a large membership of working women. They demanded the economic Terror, forcing the Jacobins to abandon the free market economy and to introduce some government control of the supply of goods and of prices, as well as the death penalty for hoarding.

**Society of Revolutionary Republican Women**  
a radical female partner to the Jacobin Club

## How did these women help create the Terror?

Their pressure was partly responsible for the creation of the revolutionary armies in June 1793 to seize food and find traitors. By September 1793, the several hundred members of the society criticised the Jacobins and pressured them to undertake more radical laws. They got them; the Jacobins passed the Law of Suspects and the Law of the General Maximum in September 1793.

## 17.5

### SIGNIFICANT INDIVIDUAL



#### Anne-Pauline Léon (1768–1838)

Pauline Léon's story shows clearly how much women contributed to the revolution, but also the limitations upon them. Léon was born in Paris and was 20 years old when the revolution broke out. She was present at the capture of the Bastille in July 1789, and played the woman's classic role of exhorting men to join the attack.

By 1791, Léon was campaigning against both royalists and constitutional monarchists such as Lafayette. She was one of many women who participated in the Cordeliers Club.

Léon soon made more radical demands, arguing to the National Assembly in March 1791 that women must be given the right to carry arms in defence of the revolution. She asked the National Assembly for the creation of a female National Guard to defend Paris. She rejected the inevitable criticisms about women neglecting their domestic duties:

*Do not believe that our intention is to abandon our homes and our families, which remain dear to our hearts. No, gentlemen, we only wish to be able to defend ourselves, unless you believe that the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen has no application to women, and that they must let themselves have their throats cut like lambs ...*

**Source 17.10** Quoted in D.G. Levy et al., *Women in Revolutionary Paris, 1789–1795*, 1979, p. 79

Léon attended the Champ de Mars demonstration in July 1791 and tried to sign the petition demanding the king's abdication. She also participated in the attack on the Tuileries Palace on 10 August 1792, but was forced by men to give up the pike she was carrying. Léon established the Society of Republican Revolutionary Women in May 1793, which she led until August 1793. She argued that women must be willing to take up arms to defend the revolution. Léon also supported the Cordeliers Club's radical demands for stronger laws against food hoarders and counter-revolutionaries.

By June 1793, the society declared its support for the Jacobin Constitution of 1793 and also helped persuade a group of radical women not to take direct action over the high price of soap. Léon supported the Jacobins by criticising the radical economic demands of the enraged ones. Clearly, Léon felt that the Jacobins were already doing enough by economic Terror to help working people. Not everybody agreed.

In August 1793, she was replaced by the more radical Claire Lacombe, who swung the society into opposition to the Jacobins. Léon withdrew from political life and married Théophile Leclerc, a leading enraged one.



◀ **Source 17.11** This engraving, *French Women Made Free*, dates to about 1790–91. It illustrates Pauline Léon's idea for a female National Guard. The idea and this image would have appeared outrageous to male revolutionaries at the time.

## 17.6

### SIGNIFICANT INDIVIDUAL



#### Claire Lacombe (1765–?)

Claire Lacombe was a feisty woman. She joined in the fighting at the Tuileries Palace on 10 August 1792 and was shot through the arm, but kept fighting, being hailed by men as a hero of the insurrection against the monarchy. Lacombe's boyfriend was Théophile Leclerc, who later left her to marry her political rival, Pauline Léon.

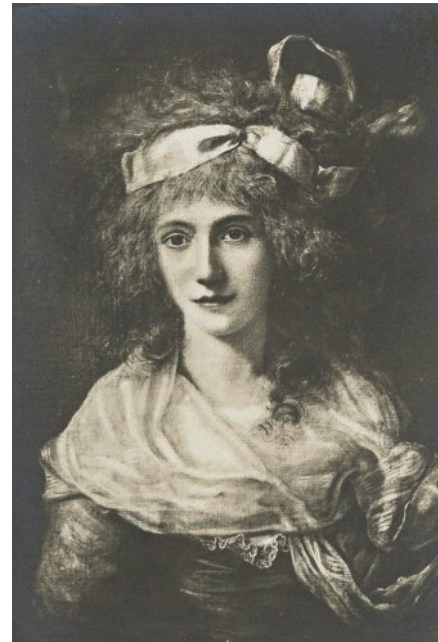
► **Source 17.12** This miniature portrait of Claire Lacombe is one of very few images of a female revolutionary leader, compared with the many representations of famous male leaders. Feminist historians call this the 'invisibility' of women in the pictorial record of history.



## Why did so few people support the women's movement?

There is a weakness hidden in documents such as de Gouges' *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen*: it was signed by only 319 women, revealing just how narrow the base of support was for these early feminists. Another women's leader, Théroigne de Méricourt, did manage to organise the working women of the Saint-Antoine district to form a women's National Guard, which actually marched to the National Convention, carrying a pike topped by a Phrygian bonnet, but overall there was not enough support for the women's movement.

The first problem was social; these early feminists did not behave or speak in a way that was likely to win over working women. According to the left-wing feminist historian Sheila Rowbotham, the early women's movement was divided by class. At this early stage, the working-class suspicion of bourgeois women was stronger than any sense of sisterhood. Rowbotham points out that these leaders were wealthy; for example, Etta Palm was a duchess, while Théroigne de Méricourt survived as a singer and courtesan. They used the noble 'de' to give themselves airs, and they dressed and spoke like wealthy people.



▲ Source 17.13 A portrait of Théroigne de Méricourt from 1788

The second problem was political. The feminist leaders generally were associated with the Girondins. When the revolutionary crowd began to hate the Girondins, who were blamed for the king's betrayal and for the disastrous war, they also hated these early 'feminists'. For example, when Théroigne de Méricourt tried to talk to some working women about women's rights in May 1793, they nearly lynched her.



▲ Source 17.14 On 16 May 1793, pro-Girondin revolutionary Théroigne de Méricourt was stripped and beaten by a group of Parisian Jacobin women. She was saved when Marat stopped the women, but from then on suffered from mental illness.

## FOCUS QUESTIONS 17.2

- 1 To what extent did revolutionary France see the birth of ideas that would later be described as 'feminist'?
- 2 What were the weaknesses of this early movement for women's rights?

## Why were women excluded from political careers?

Women did not gain the right to vote in either 1789 or in 1792; in fact, in France they would not win this right until 1944. Can we blame this simply on the sexism of male revolutionaries?

In the early stages of the revolution, there was an opening up of politics to women. For example, Claude Dansard's Fraternal Society was the first to admit women to political debates and give them equal voting rights on motions. Dansard was so committed to participation for women that he insisted that the club should have revolving appointments, with women elected 50 per cent of the time.

Historian Lynn Hunt believes that the French Revolution was very hostile to women. She discovered that the French revolutionaries used the word 'effeminate' to mean national weakness and corruption. 'Feminine' was almost a political dirty word, forcing revolutionaries towards its opposite, the idea of a stern, specifically male virility. If the old regime was frivolous, corrupt and feminine, the new order would be severe, more serious and more masculine.

Furthermore, as women moved into the political sphere, they intimidated male revolutionaries. Some asked the National Convention to limit women's participation in politics. For example, in September 1793, the Jacobin Amar – one of the most ferocious members of the Committee of Public Safety – stated:

*The political rights of a citizen are to discuss and make resolutions concerning the interest of the state ... Do women have the moral force and the physical strength required for each of these roles? Universal opinion says that they do not. Does a woman's decency allow her to appear in public and to argue with men? To argue with the people on questions affecting the safety of the republic? In general, women are not capable of elevated thought or careful reflection ... Their presence in popular societies would therefore give an active role to people who are easily fooled or misled.*

**Source 17.15** Extract from Darline Levy, Harriet Applewhite, Mary Johnson, *Women in Revolutionary Paris, 1789–1795*, 1980, pp. 213–217

## Were women linked with the threat of popular radicalism?

There is a political explanation for the growing hostility towards women's political action. The Jacobins, alleged 'friends' of the popular movement, only barely controlled the women's movement, and secretly feared its independence, radicalism and power. In 1793, for example, Claire Lacombe addressed Robespierre in the National Convention and threatened him with militant action.

*Our sex has produced only one monster [she meant Marie-Antoinette], while for four years we have been betrayed, assassinated, by monsters without number of the masculine sex. Our rights are those of the people and, if we are oppressed, we will know how to provide resistance to oppression.*

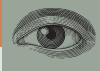
**Source 17.16** Darline Levy, Harriet Applewhite and Mary Johnson, *Women in Revolutionary Paris, 1789–1795*, 1980, pp. 213–17

Lacombe extended the *sans-culottes'* idea of the right to insurrection to women. This frightened male deputies because it was a threat of violence made by women. After August 1793, women began to associate with the radical Hébertistes, the radical club movement, the sections of Paris and the enraged ones. They all agreed that the matter of subsistence was a political issue and pressured the National Convention for laws against food hoarders and for economic Terror to punish them.



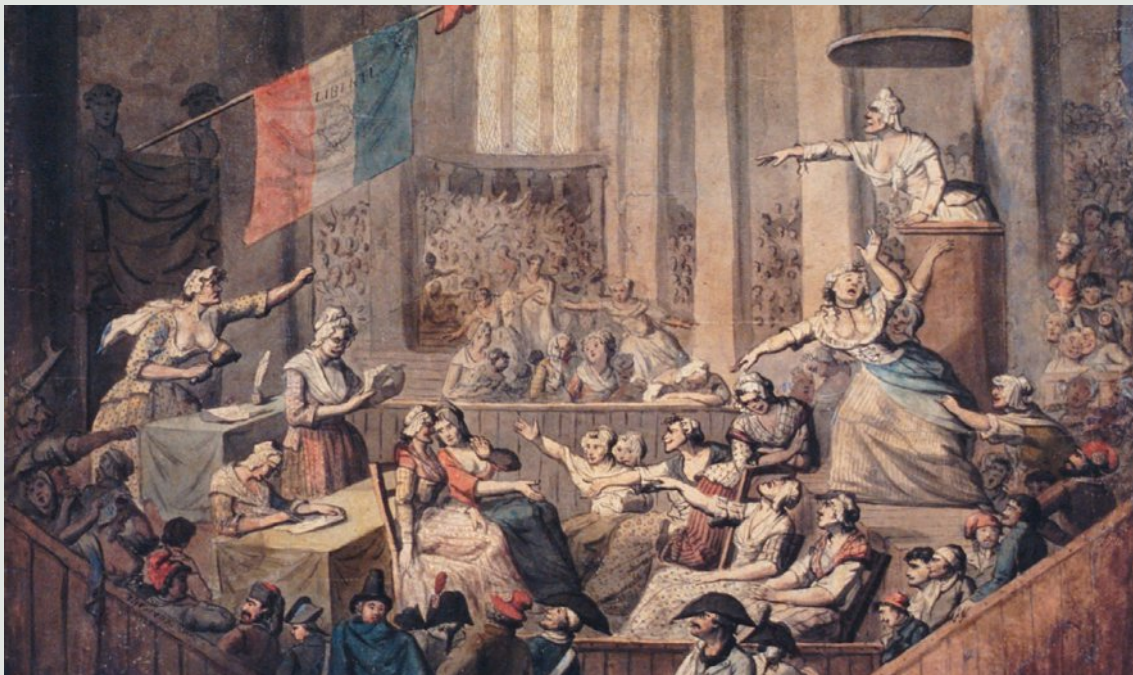
The women's movement was closely linked with the popular movement, but the Jacobins only needed the support of the popular movement as long as the war emergency was a threat to the new society. When the Jacobins rejected the Parisian popular movement, they also rejected the women's movement, and finally banned women from involvement in political life in October 1793.

### ANALYSIS ACTIVITY 17.2: READING A PRIMARY SOURCE



#### Images reveal male fears of women's power

Look carefully at the image shown in Source 17.17, then answer the questions that follow.



▲ **Source 17.17** This watercolour by Chérieux shows a women's club meeting in Paris, in a disused church, in about 1793

- 1 What is the overall impression of this women's club?
- 2 Look carefully at the rough drawing of the women's faces. What does this artist think of women who enter the male world of politics?
- 3 These women gesture wildly and, improbably, their dresses come undone, and they do not seem to care. What does the artist mean us to understand about the dangers of letting women into politics?

## 17.7 The repression of revolutionary women

One of the most powerful fears of the period 1792–94 was the fear of counter-revolution. The assassination of Marat was carried out by a woman; Charlotte Corday's act caused a wave of feeling against women as agents of the counter-revolution, further strengthened by a second, unsuccessful, assassination attempt against Robespierre by a young woman.

### Why did the National Convention close women's clubs?

By September 1793, the National Convention was expressing alarm at the growing power of women's groups. For example, in October 1793 the Jacobins debated whether women had any right to enter the political field. A deputy asked the Committee of General Security whether women should be

allowed into popular societies and whether they could expect political rights and participation. The committee's answer was a definitive no. This attitude probably explains why women's clubs were closed on 30 October 1793. The Jacobins were anxious to silence all forms of the left-wing popular movement that were making radical demands for economic measures and, since this left wing happened to include some of the women's clubs, they had to be silenced too.

The National Convention also feared the embarrassment of women bursting into the assembly to demand economic measures and the stronger use of the Terror to enforce them. Any criticism that the Jacobins were not doing enough undermined the Jacobins' position as the people's champions. In addition, the National Convention were frightened by the fact that the working women who demanded economic measures were joining with other radical popular currents such as the enraged ones.

The Jacobins had a good excuse to shut down the women's clubs; the militant market women of Paris opposed price fixing because it limited their profits. They complained to the National Convention that the women of the clubs had tried to force them to wear the revolutionary cockade and that the price fixing was unfair.



◀ Source 17.18 This coloured engraving depicts a women's club meeting in 1792.

## How were women put back in their place?

With regard to the women's movement – then, as now – it is clear that many men were afraid of the powerful political voice of women. Feminist historians see this fear very clearly in the way the revolution used and controlled images of women.

The Jacobins deliberately used images to reinforce traditional gender roles. In November 1793, for example, an official newspaper, the *Journal of Public Safety*, carried this exhortation:

*Women! Do you want to be republican women? You must love, obey and teach the laws which remind your husbands and your children of the use of their rights; be glorious in daring deeds so that they might help our homeland ... be simple in the way you dress and hardworking in your homes; do not go to popular assemblies with the intention of speaking in them; but let your attendance there sometimes encourage your children; then our country will bless you, because you will have truly done what it has a right to expect of you.*

Source 17.19 Quoted in Paule-Marie Duhet, *Les Femmes et la Révolution Française, 1789–1794*, 1971, pp. 155–7, translated by Michael Adcock

The message was that working women should go home, have babies and raise good citizens.

The National Convention also created the image of the ideal republican mother, who leaves the public field of politics for home life. The allegorical figure of the republic has been maternalised, exactly matching deputies' statements such as the following:

*For too long we have allowed women to leave their homes to be present at the deliberations of the National Assembly, at the debates of popular societies. You will recall their true, their unique vocation, and not permit them to deviate from it any more. They will ... no longer interfere in public affairs ... The motherland will be neither a vixen nor a stepmother. You will see in her only a good mother of the family.*

**Source 17.20** Quoted in William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 1989, p. 421



**▲ Source 17.21** This anonymous engraving is called *Republican France Offers Her Breast to All Frenchmen* and offers an ideal of motherhood.

### FOCUS QUESTIONS 17.3

- 1 To what degree were revolutionary women linked with the popular movement?
- 2 Why did the National Convention exclude women from politics after 1793?

## What did women gain from the revolution?

Women were important actors in the revolutionary events, yet ultimately they were denied political involvement in the French Revolution. However, the historian Godineau points out that women still gained a great deal because, like working people generally, they at least had experience of political participation and the power of popular sovereignty. Such experiences were not forgotten and had effects long after the revolution had finished.

### THE STORY SO FAR

By late 1793, the Jacobins had begun the process of shutting down the political participation of both working people and women. Nonetheless, a generation of women had been changed by their experience of 10 years of revolution. Several had made significant statements of women's rights. In the longer term, the women's movement would have a long and rich history throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Use the QR code or visit the Interactive Textbook and watch the video summarising the chapter.



## Develop your historical-thinking skills

### Using historical terms meaningfully

Write an extended paragraph analysing why and explaining how women participated in the French Revolution. What factors limited the political gains made by women in these years? Use the following phrases and terms to show you understand their meaning and context:

- subsistence issues
- political rights for women
- Dominique Godineau
- discussion groups
- local vigilantes
- Olympe de Gouges
- *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen*
- Society of Revolutionary Republican Women.

### Analysing historian's interpretations

#### Lynn Hunt (1945–)

Lynn Hunt offers a feminist interpretation of the French Revolution. Feminists like Hunt argue that the French Revolution itself was innately hostile to women or at least that it became so after a certain point. Hunt's two important studies, *Eroticism and the Body Politic* (1991) and *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (1992) have been enormously influential.

As a feminist, Hunt is particularly attentive to the representation of women and as a cultural historian she tends to read deeply into visual representations of women. In particular, Hunt agrees with Robert Darnton that 'political pornography' in France in the 1780s was a way of attacking all forms of authority, including the king and the queen, the nobility and the church. In essence, these were crude, rude sexual images of a person, designed to make people lose respect for that figure. When applied to royal figures, it caused the loss of respect for a figure who traditionally had been revered. Hunt writes:

*Royal figures in many times and in many places have been the subject of such writing, but not all royal figures at all times. When royal bodies become the focus of such interest, we can be sure that something is at issue in the larger body politic. As Robert Darnton has shown, [this sexual sensationalism] was a choice means of attacking the entire 'establishment' – the court, the church, the aristocracy, the academies, the salons and the monarchy itself. Marie-Antoinette occupies a curious place in this literature; she was not only demeaned and lampooned in an increasingly ferocious pornographic outpouring, but she was also tried and executed.*

Source 17.22 Lynn Hunt, *Eroticism and the Body Politic*, 1991, p. 108



#### *Eroticism and the Body Politic*

Edited by  
Lynn Hunt

▲ Source 17.23 Top: Lynn Hunt. Bottom: *Eroticism and the Body Politic* (1991).

- 1 What, in general, are the aims of feminist historians in the writing of history?
- 2 What sorts of information do feminist historians discover by examining representations (e.g., pictures) of women?
- 3 How might 'political pornography' (rude representations of people in power) damage a ruler's prestige and authority?
- 4 Why might political pornography have a negative effect on all forms of authority generally?

### Dominique Godineau (1958– )

Historian Dominique Godineau wrote:

*Only a few women claimed the right to vote during the revolution. Nevertheless, the question of their citizenship always faces the historian because the problem keeps recurring: how was it possible to be a citoyenne [female citizen], how was it possible for women to become involved in political life, without acquiring all the attributes of citizenship? An important women's movement, too long forgotten in the historiography, existed at the heart of the revolutionary movement. During certain periods, nothing distinguished this women's movement from the whole of the popular movement in Paris; at other times it stood out. One such moment was October, 1789, when women marched to Versailles and returned with the king; another was the spring and summer of 1793, when groups of militant women were very strong and a minority of sans-culottes went so far as to argue that women as well as men could participate in politics ...*

**Source 17.24** 'Masculine and Feminine Political Practice During the French Revolution, 1793–Year III', in Harriet Applewhite and Darline Levy, *Women and the Age of Democratic Revolution*, 1981, pp. 61–107

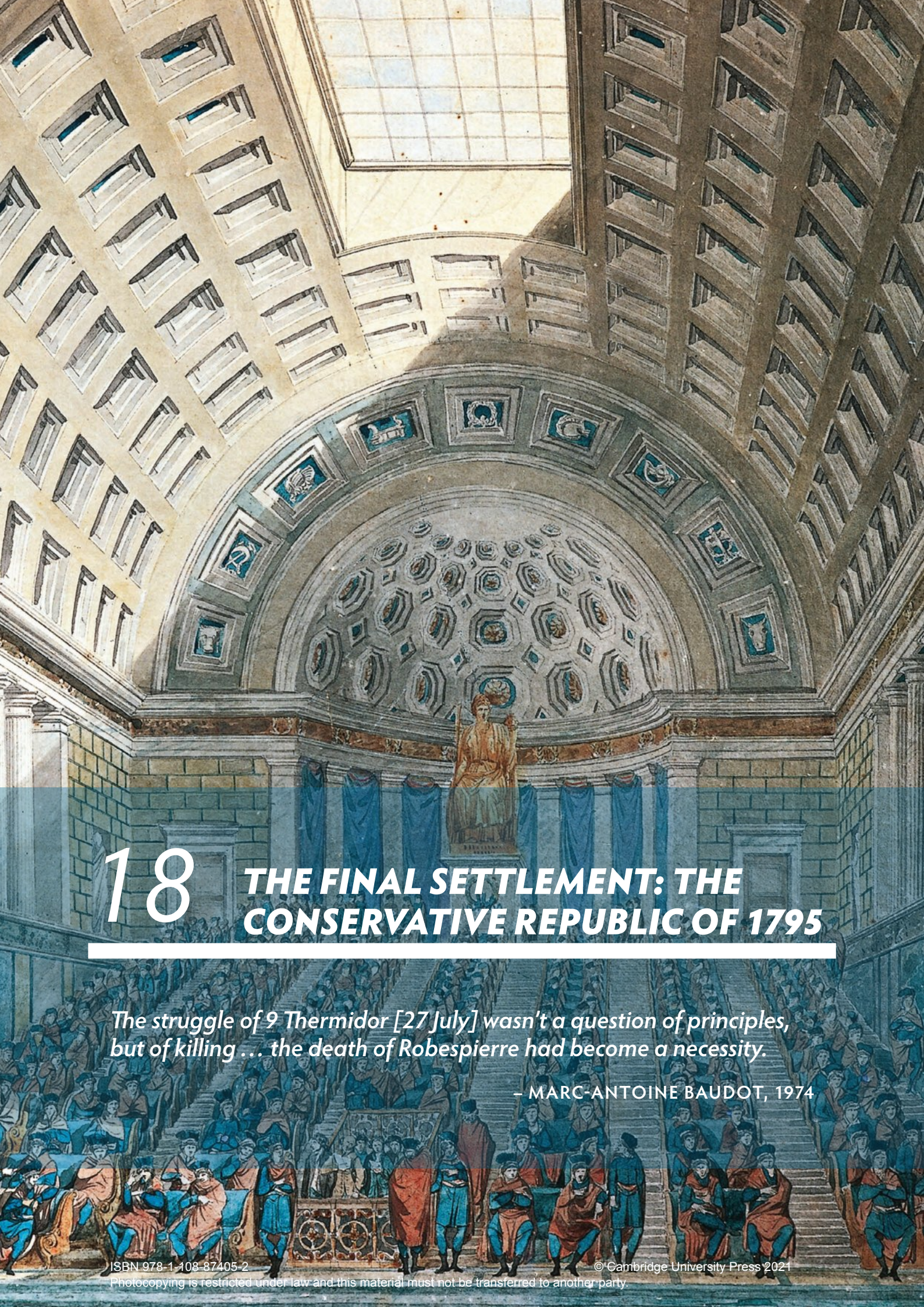
- 1 Why, according to Godineau, is there a serious contradiction between the role played by women in the revolution and the political role given to them?
- 2 Why does Godineau choose the two examples of October 1789 and mid-1793 as examples of the women's movement taking action?

## Analysing cause and consequence

Using four or five main points, explain what factors led women to take part in the French Revolution.

## Constructing historical arguments

'The revolutionary women's movement rose with the popular movement and, once the emergency of 1792–93 was over, fell with the popular movement.' To what extent do you feel that this is true of the women's movement during the French Revolution?



# 18

## THE FINAL SETTLEMENT: THE CONSERVATIVE REPUBLIC OF 1795

*The struggle of 9 Thermidor [27 July] wasn't a question of principles, but of killing ... the death of Robespierre had become a necessity.*

— MARC-ANTOINE BAUDOT, 1974

## Overview



By July 1794, the political (or factional) Terror had eliminated so many groups – the Girondins, the Hébertists, Danton and the Indulgents – that most remaining revolutionaries felt threatened. Robespierre's vague accusations caused a group of deputies to plot his overthrow, causing his rapid execution. The events of Thermidor (July 1794) unleashed a nationwide backlash against the Jacobins. To stabilise the revolution, the National Convention drafted a third, less radical, constitution: the Constitution of 1795. The so-called directory was a conservative republic, yet it too was destabilised by the powerful political forces of both the left and the right.

## Key issues

- What caused the fall of the Jacobin government in Thermidor (July) 1794?
- How has Robespierre been (mis)represented over time?
- What was the effect of the Thermidorian reaction?
- Who was Boissy d'Anglas?
- What were the aims of the Constitution of 1795?

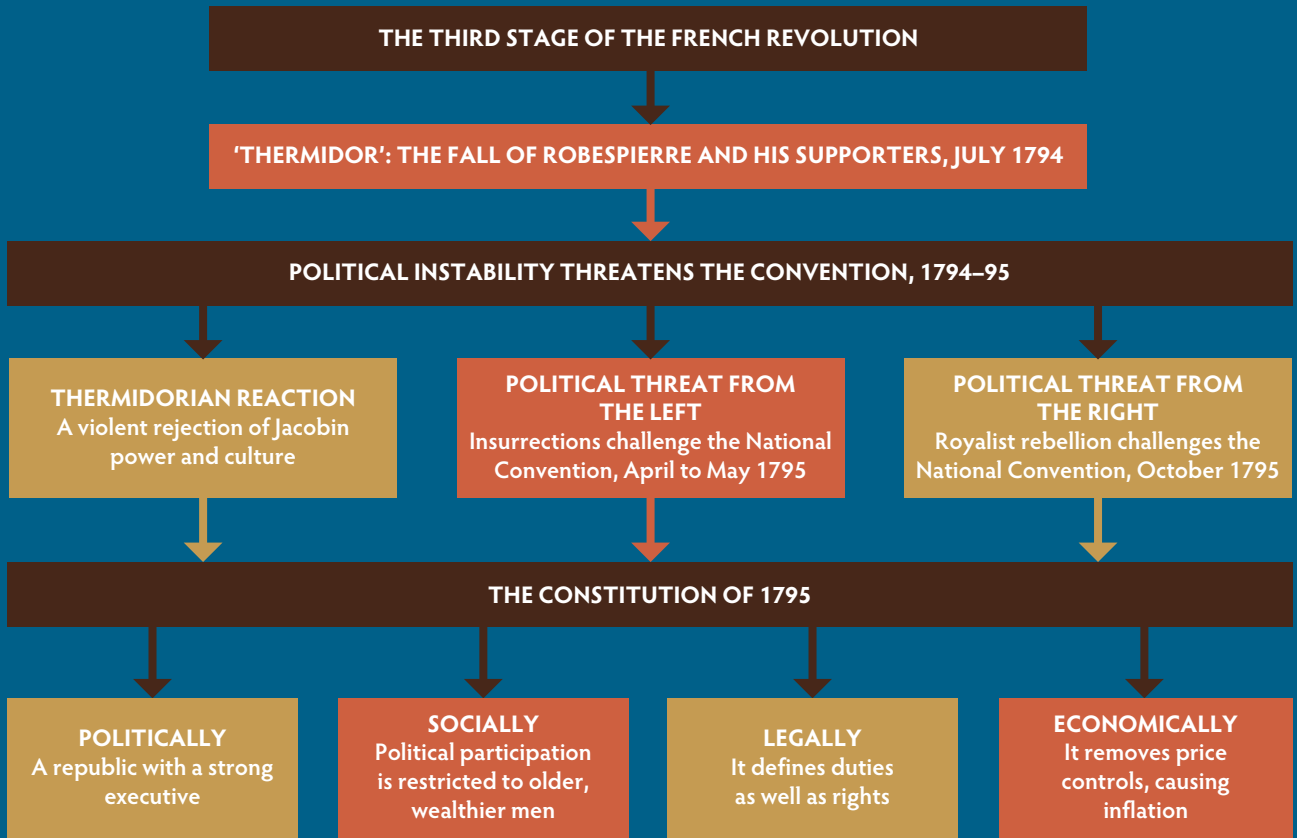
## Digital resources for this chapter

In the *Interactive Textbook*:

-  Video and audio sources and questions
-  Digital activities.

◀ **Source 18.0** A watercolour of the Council of Five Hundred, the new parliamentary body for the conservative republic

# Flow of chapter



# Chapter timeline

**27–28 JULY 1794**  
*The fall of Robespierre and the Jacobins*



**1–2 APRIL 1795**  
*The Insurrection of 12 Germinal*



**22 AUGUST 1795**  
*The Constitution of Year III creates a conservative republic restricted to wealthy men*



**1 AUGUST 1794**  
*Law of Prairial repealed*



**20–23 MAY 1795**  
*The Insurrection of 1 Prairial*

**26 OCTOBER 1795**  
*Closure of the National Convention*

316



## 18.1 The fall of the Jacobin government

Government by Terror and leadership by fear contain the seeds of their own destruction. When Terror kills even revolutionary heroes, the remaining people fear they will be next. The atmosphere of paranoia now worked against Robespierre.

### The atmosphere of fear

The Law of 22 Prairial that was enacted on 10 June 1794 exceeded even the Law of Suspects in giving the committees power to arrest and execute people; it also eliminated the deputies' parliamentary immunity. Anybody could now be arrested, as Danton had discovered. Robespierre threatened anyone who questioned the law. Frightened, some deputies plotted to remove him.

On 26 July 1794, Robespierre criticised four committee members, saying that people who were not sufficiently revolutionary were traitors. He then made an inexplicable blunder; he gave a long, rambling speech in the National Convention demanding one last purge because there were still traitors to be destroyed. The deputies, panic-stricken, called for Robespierre to name them. He refused, saying that they were in the National

Convention, the Committee of Public Safety and the Committee of General Security, effectively threatening nearly everybody.



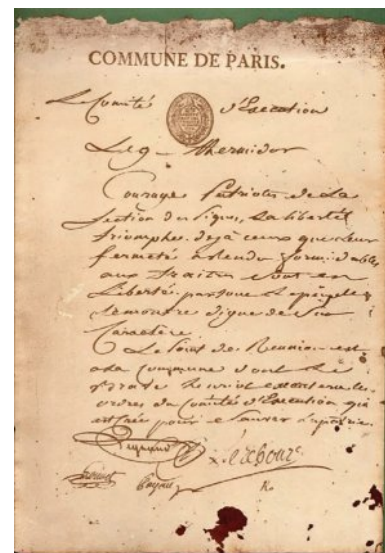
◀ **Source 18.1** Left: This sketch by François Gérard shows Robespierre very much in control of debates in the National Convention.

Right: The second sketch, in comparison, captures Robespierre at the moment of crisis, when the deputies of the National Convention challenged his authority and demanded to know promptly who he was referring to in his speech announcing further Terror.

## 18.2 The overthrow of Robespierre in Thermidor

On 27 July 1794 (the revolutionary month of Thermidor), a group of deputies hastily arrested him. This parliamentary coup was desperately dangerous because Robespierre was powerful. The popular movement responded, but it was too slow to save him. Using a recent law, the National Convention declared Robespierre an 'outlaw', allowing prompt execution. In the struggle, he was shot in the face, leaving his jaw hanging loose by a strip of skin.

► **Source 18.2** This tragic document traces the fall of a great revolutionary. The executive committee of the Paris Commune sent out an urgent call to the *sans-culottes* of the sections, asking them to come to the town hall to liberate Robespierre and the Jacobins. Some did respond, but they were not able to halt the conspiracy to overthrow and execute Robespierre. Robespierre himself began signing this request, but only wrote the first two letters of his name before his blood started dripping on to the document.





▲ Source 18.3 *The Night of 9 Thermidor Year II, or The Arrest of Robespierre 1794* by Fulcran-Jean Harriet

The executions followed with understandable rapidity that same afternoon: Robespierre was first and, since the guard cruelly wrenched off the bandage leaving his shattered jaw dangling loose, he was screaming with pain as he was laid under the blade. The National Convention then purged 80 people in the first sweep, including Robespierre's brother, Saint-Just and Couthon.



▲ Source 18.4 *Left*: This coloured engraving expresses the hostility of the conspirators to Robespierre and his colleagues. *Right*: This image shows Robespierre's head being placed in the guillotine.

## 18.3 The representation of Robespierre

How has Robespierre been seen over time? The answer is complex. Even before his execution, Robespierre was both revered and hated, and this duality of opinion was continued and intensified when he was overthrown.

The first myth-makers were the **Thermidorians** – the revolutionaries who organised the coup against Robespierre. In January 1795, E.B. Courtois presented a report to the National Assembly that started the Robespierre myth. Precisely because the National Assembly itself was guilty of the excesses of the Terror, it shifted the blame onto Robespierre, destroying all evidence of his moderation and exaggerating evidence of his action.

**Thermidorians** the revolutionaries who organised the coup against Robespierre, and the arrest and rapid execution of the leader and his closest followers

The report accused him of seeking ‘the levelling [of society] by the extinction of wealth and the ruin of commerce’, by the dangerous technique of stirring up working people and inciting them to rule over the propertied classes. Robespierre was presented as a mediocre politician inflated with monstrous vanity and fired by an inhuman ruthlessness. The savagery of the attack on Robespierre continued unabated after his death.

## 18.4 The Thermidorian reaction

The period after the fall of the Jacobins is called the **Thermidorian reaction**. During this time there was a campaign to destroy the Jacobins’ control of politics and the society they had created. The Terror did not stop immediately; it claimed victims such as the public prosecutor, Fouquier-Tinville.

**Thermidorian reaction** a campaign during 1794–95 to destroy the Jacobins’ control of politics, stop the processes of the Terror, and eliminate working people and women from political life

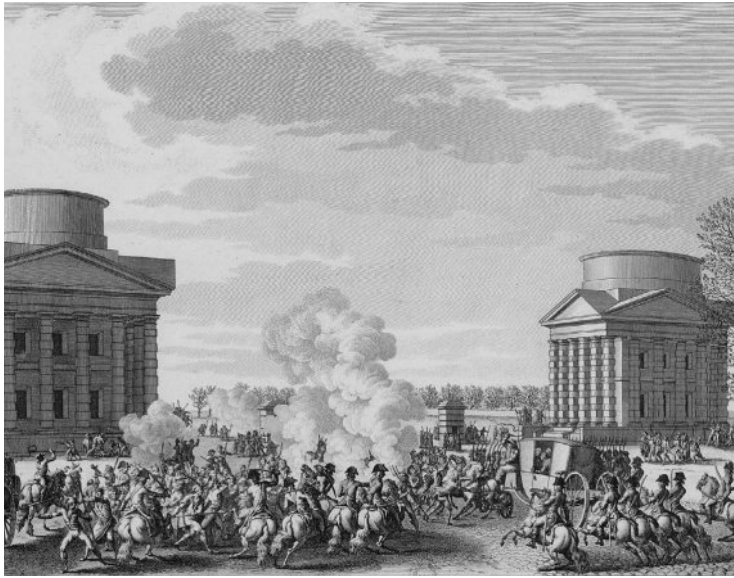
The National Convention was now caught between two powerful political forces, the reborn left-wing and right-wing groups. The popular revolutionary movement, driven by economic desperation, reasserted itself. And powerful counter-revolutionary forces, such as nobles and priests, returned seeking revenge.

### The insurrections of April and May 1795

The first challenge came from the popular movement. Working people realised that the fall of the Jacobins meant the loss of their few remaining economic gains. In two separate insurrections, they invaded the National Convention in a final attempt to push the revolution back onto its proper course of economic reform. Political and material demands were intertwined because they demanded the return of the democratic Constitution of 1793 and the lowering of the price of bread.

The **Insurrection of 12 Germinal** on 1 April 1795 demanded the return of the Constitution of 1793, the provision of cheaper bread and the outlawing of the gangs of gilded youth. This rebellion had no leaders because the Paris Commune and the section meetings had been infiltrated. There was no support from the National Guard, which defended the National Convention. The National Convention summoned gangs of right-wing activists, who evicted the demonstrators.

**Insurrection of 12 Germinal** an attack on 1 April 1795 on the National Convention by the Parisian crowd, who demanded cheaper bread and the Constitution of 1793



◀ Source 18.5 An engraving depicting the events of the Insurrection of 12 Germinal.

**Insurrection of 1 Prairial** a second attack on 20 May 1795 on the National Convention by desperate *sans-culottes* demanding the reduction of bread prices and the return of the Constitution of 1793; one deputy was murdered

The **Insurrection of 1 Prairial** on 20 May 1795 was also a crowd attack on the National Convention. One deputy, Jean Féraud, bravely put himself in front of the demonstrators. He was shot dead, his body was carried outside and a demonstrator with a sharp knife cut his head off – as effortlessly as slicing a pumpkin in half, noted one observer – tossing it like a trophy to the crowd. It was fixed on a pike, carried back into the National Convention and held up under the nose of Boissy d’Anglas, who had taken the president’s chair. Without leaders, though, the crowd did not know what to do and was soon dispersed by troops.

The next day, the crowd threatened the National Convention with an array of cannon, but again the situation was defused.



▲ Source 18.6 By 20 May 1795, price rises and bread rationing had driven the popular movement to new levels of desperation, expressed in their attack on the National Convention. The deputy Féraud swore he would stop them, but was shot dead. When the crowd waved his head in front of the president, Boissy d’Anglas took off his hat and bowed to it.

## Repression of the popular movement by the 'dry guillotine'

The National Convention now savagely repressed the *sans-culottes* movement, arresting 4000 militants. Afraid to use the guillotine, the government deported them to a military prison on a remote desert island instead; contemporaries grimly called the punishment 'the dry guillotine'.

The National Convention declared it a criminal offence to demand the return of the Constitution of 1793. It tried to execute the murderer of Jean Féraud, but the crowd rescued him. So, the National Convention mustered an army of 25 000 men to 'invade' the Saint-Antoine suburb. It ordered that cannon be trained on the suburb and an ultimatum issued: stop the fighting and surrender the murderer or the entire suburb would be flattened.

The National Convention now consolidated its victory over the popular movement. It banned the use of the word 'revolutionary' and ordered the police to arrest any activists. It changed the National Guard back to a bourgeois institution.

## The revolutionary challenge from the right

By October 1795, the right-wing forces, especially royalists, were preparing to restore a king; although the young royal prince had died of tuberculosis of the bones in June 1795, King Louis VI's brother declared himself Louis XVIII and promised to reinstitute the old regime. When plans for a military invasion by Britain failed, they turned to internal politics and won over seven sections of Paris by saying that the government was starving working people.

When these sections rose in rebellion, the National Convention chose a young Brigadier of Corsican origin, Napoleon Bonaparte, gave him eight cannon and 8000 men, and instructed him to defend the National Convention. The massive royalist force marched on Paris on 5 October 1795 and fortunately decided to attack in military style – that is, in formal columns – rather than by revolutionary street fighting. Bonaparte placed his cannon brilliantly and loaded them not with cannon balls but with grapeshot, small bullets that scatter with the same effect as a modern machine-gun. The columns of royalist rebels attacked the National Convention but the cannon effectively dispersed them.



▲ **Source 18.7** When his nephew Louis XVII died, the Count of Provence, King Louis XVI's brother, declared himself King Louis XVIII.



◀ **Source 18.8**  
Left: This engraving by Hellman is a representation of the events near the Church of Saint Roch. Right: Napoleon Bonaparte used artillery near the Church of Saint Roch to disperse the royalist attack on the National Convention on 5 October 1795.



## Dismantling the machinery of Terror

The most urgent task was to dismantle the legal machinery of the Terror. The National Convention weakened the two powerful committees, splitting them up into 16 groups, each with lesser powers. The Committee of Public Safety lost its control of local government and the army. All committees were made more closely accountable to the National Convention. The Law of Suspects and the Law of 22 Prairial were abolished, and the revolutionary tribunal was closed. The civil liberties of 1789 were reintroduced.

## The White Terror: Monarchists take revenge on Jacobins

Jacobin rule had involved domination, repression and great human suffering, generating savage hatreds. People now sought revenge, creating the ‘White’ Terror. Throughout France, there was a murderous series of attacks against Jacobins. In Paris and across France, Jacobin clubs were shut down.



► Source 18.9 A depiction of the White Terror and the murder of Jacobins

## Ordinary people use culture to express their ideals

Ordinary people also rejected Jacobin beliefs by destroying artworks. A bust of Marat was thrown into the Paris sewers. David’s paintings of the martyrs Marat and Le Pelletier were removed from the National Convention. Bands of local officials searched houses, destroying popular revolutionary decorations.

**muscadins** lavishly dressed men who adopted a virtual uniform (square-cut coats, tight trousers into low boots, flamboyantly high collars and cravats) as a rejection of the Jacobin taste for simplicity

People rejected the Jacobin taste for simplicity and adopted a luxurious style of dress. These gorgeously dressed men were called **muscadins**. They adopted a virtual uniform: square-cut coats, tight trousers into low boots, and flamboyantly high collars and cravats.

### FOCUS QUESTIONS 18.1

- 1 Why is it true to say that the National Convention after 1795 found itself caught between the forces of the political left wing and the political right wing?
- 2 What was the White Terror?

## AMAZING BUT TRUE ...

By 1795, fashion was quite morbid – men wore exaggeratedly high collars, pretending to hide scars from the guillotine. Their female companions were the *merveilleuses* or the marvellous ones. They held dinner balls for victims of the guillotine, macabre affairs in which women wore their hair roughly shorn off as if by an executioner. The illusion was completed by a small band of blood-red ribbon worn around the neck, creating the illusion that the head had been cut by the blade but not removed.



▲ Source 18.10 This engraving shows a group of people adopting an exaggerated aristocratic style of dress, as a rejection of Jacobin values.

## The campaign to crush the popular movement

The *muscadins*, drawn mainly from the middle-class youth of Paris and the sons of aristocrats who had died at the guillotine, now invaded working-class suburbs and attacked radical workers. They also made it impossible for working people to attend the local Paris section meetings, quickly stifling the popular movement.

## The new political team of 1795

Politically, this fourth 'team' of politicians comprised moderates, such as the 75 surviving Girondins or the middling deputies from the Plain. Some were conservatives, such as the royalists who now formed a healthy right wing in the parliament.

Socially, the new political team of 1795 was also moderate. These men were more established, more successful and tough-minded. They were experienced and used to holding positions of authority. They were wealthy, having made a fortune out of the revolution. They had a large stake in society and were determined not to lose it. They had principles, but practical concerns were uppermost. For example, the use of Terror did not bother them, but the idea of stirring up the working classes seemed to them to be very dangerous.

## 18.5

### SIGNIFICANT INDIVIDUAL



#### Boissy d'Anglas (1756–1828)

Boissy d'Anglas was the popular leading statesman after the events of Thermidor. He helped to instigate a return to a constitutional government in France after years of revolutionary government and extreme measures. Boissy d'Anglas offered a moderate alternative to the radicalism of Robespierre and the Jacobins. (See Cambridge GO for more information about this leader.)

► **Source 8.11** This painting shows the new national hero after Thermidor: Boissy d'Anglas.



In politics – men of property: 'You must therefore guarantee political rights for the well-to-do'. This portrait shows the sort of wealthy man who dominated politics. André-François Miot served as Consul for France to Florence. His luxurious home sends a clear message about his wealth and respectability.



Out of politics – the former mayor of Nantes dressed quite simply during the revolutionary era, to avoid any appearance of upper-class luxury.

▲ **Source 18.12** These two portraits – which you can see in the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria – show the types of people who now dominated politics, and those who were shut out.

## 18.6 The dissolution of the National Convention and the new constitution

The last task of the National Convention was to appoint committees to draft a new constitution and to then approve it. During 1795, Boissy d'Anglas and the Committee of Eleven drew up France's third revolutionary constitution. When it was completed on 22 August 1795, they believed that they had finally created a political structure allowing the original revolutionary ideals of 1789–91 to be realised, while protecting them from the radicalism that had distorted those ideals between August 1792 and July 1794.

The Constitution of 1795 was accepted by the National Convention, which was then dissolved in October 1795. In designing a new version of the republic, the National Convention aimed to re-establish order by creating a strong executive government: the Executive Directory.

The political climate changed again. Gone was the Jacobin culture of confraternity, the egalitarian spirit of citizen speaking to citizen; gone was Robespierre's puritanical cult of simplicity and the simmering resentment against wealth. The new heroes of this stage of the revolution were the respectable, propertied classes.



## ANALYSIS ACTIVITY 18.1: READING A PRIMARY SOURCE



## An image showing the Constitution of 1795

Study the image shown in Source 18.13, then answer the questions that follow.

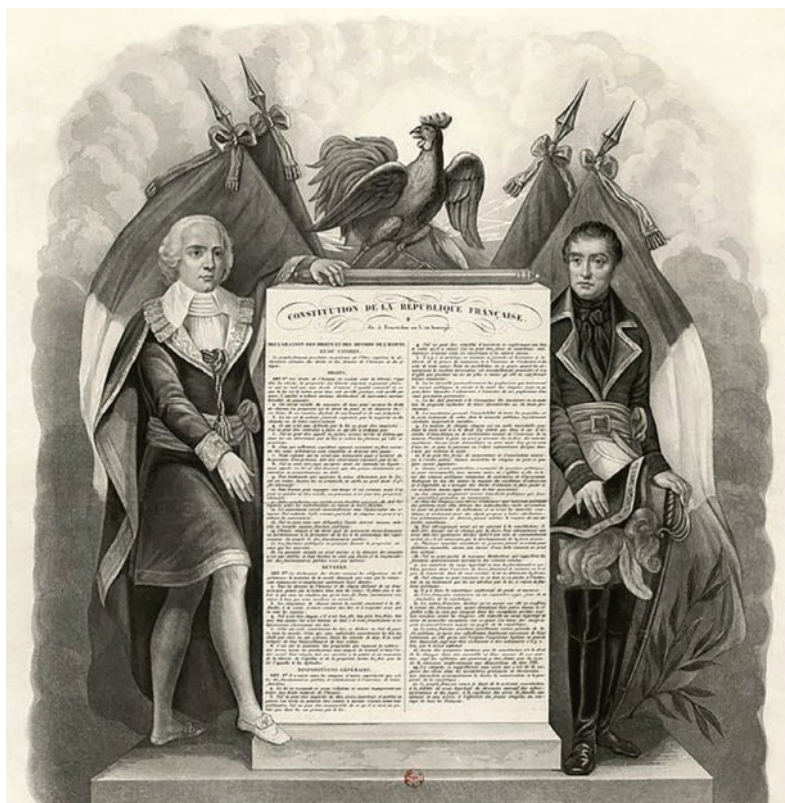
- 1 According to this image, what sort of person was likely to be a friend of the Constitution of 1795 and what sort of person needed to be crushed underfoot?
- 2 From what you know of this third stage of the French Revolution, how accurate is this representation of the crushing of the popular movement?

► **Source 18.13** The ideology of 1795 can be summed up in this political cartoon, showing a man of property crushing a radical *sans-culotte*, while pointing to the 'safe' Constitution of 1795.



## New social values: The Declaration of Rights and Duties

The Constitution of 1795 reiterated the general principles and basic rights of 1789. In the section titled 'Rights', Articles 1–22 reaffirmed the origin of sovereignty, the law as the expression of the general will, basic rights such as liberty, equality, security and property, and the separation of powers. This section therefore guarantees what historian D.G. Wright calls 'the permanent political gains of the Revolution'.



◀ **Source 18.14** This engraving shows the new constitution of 1795. Notice that there is not a single revolutionary symbol but just the French flags and the French rooster, a sign of national military pride. A respectable politician stands at left, protected by a military officer at right.



## Redefining words: Equality

The new social values are obvious in words that were subtly changed. In 1789, ‘equality’ meant a general sense of natural rights; in 1793, it meant a more radical political and social equality; by 1795, it was reduced to an assurance that everybody was equal before the law.

## Banning words: Fraternity

For the men of 1795, ‘fraternity’ was a dangerous word. Although it originally simply meant ‘brotherhood’, the *sans-culottes* used it to mean ‘hatred of the rich’. The most radical *sans-culottes*, especially the enraged ones led by Roux and Varlet, had made this term into an aggressive hatred of all propertied people, and had even suggested the dangerous idea of taking property from the rich to give to the poor. The men of 1795 could not tolerate this radicalism; they were rich themselves and were now preaching *respect* for the rich. The word ‘fraternity’ could not be spoken and was even removed from public buildings. A complete language ban was also applied to the idea of the right to insurrection and the whole radical Constitution of 1793. It was illegal even to mention it.

## Introducing words: Duties

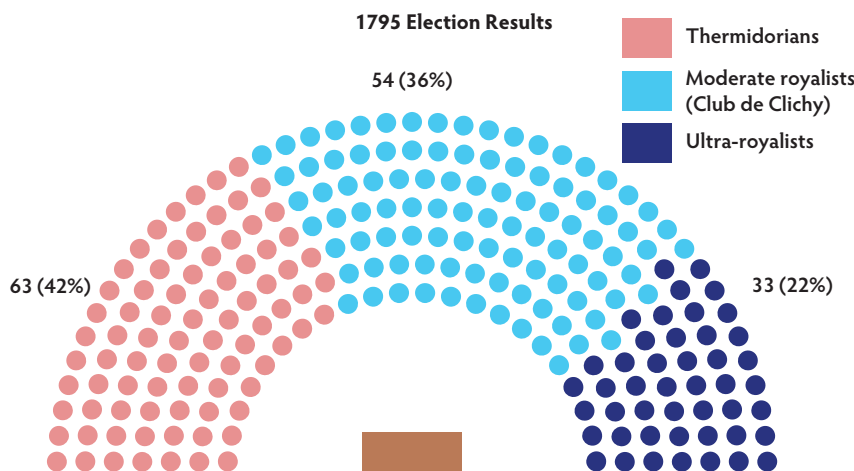
The new buzzword was ‘duties’, which were all related to the good of society, including obedience, legality and property. Article 3 of the Constitution of 1795 defined the obligation of each member of society as ‘submitting to its laws and submitting to its agents’. For Boissy d’Anglas, who had witnessed the invasion of the National Convention on the day of 1 Prairial, there would be no more direct intimidation of elected representatives. His idea of a good man was somebody who would ‘religiously observe the law’.

## Emphasising words: Property

The Constitution of 1795 again emphasised the sacred nature of private property as the basis of all society (Article 8), which was an idea that had been stated three times in the Declaration of 1789.

## Political precautions: Legislature

Structurally, these men of 1795 were more cautious, choosing a two-house (bicameral) parliament, which is ‘safer’ than a single-house national assembly. The upper house was designed, as in England, to be a brake upon the lower house. In 1789, this precaution was discussed but rejected as unnecessary; in 1795, it seemed crucial. Thus, the Council of Five Hundred wrote and proposed new laws, which were submitted to the Council of Ancients, a group of 250 deputies whose minimum age had to be 40.



◀ **Source 18.15** The results of the 1795 election, as adapted from Denis Woronoff, *La République bourgeoise de Thermidor à Brumaire, 1794–1799*, 1972, Seuil, p. 246. The voter turnout for this election was 0.5% (turnout for the 1792 election was under 20%), and reveals the extent of the fall of the Jacobins. The parliamentary body is now made up of the Thermidorians and more conservative royalists.



▲ Source 18.16 Left: Depiction of the uniforms of the Council of Ancients. Right: Depiction of the Council of Five Hundred.

## Political precautions: The strong executive arm of government

The Council of Five Hundred proposed 50 members for the executive arm of government. The Council of Ancients chose five of them, who formed a tight, effective, compact executive government, known as the Executive Directory. To avoid dictatorships, each was president for three months. These five directors appointed their own executive government. They were allowed to appoint seven ministers, each of whom had a specific portfolio, but the ministers never met as a group. Each minister reported individually to the Executive Directory.

### FOCUS QUESTIONS 18.2

- 1 What were the main features of the Constitution of 1795?
- 2 How effective was the government of the Executive Directory in dealing with France's serious internal and external problems after 1795?

### THE STORY SO FAR

During the third and final phase of the revolution, from the Thermidorian reaction (starting July 1794) to the introduction of the Constitution of 1795 (voted 22 August and proclaimed 23 September 1795), the revolutionaries consciously tried to create a new and more stable form of government that would allow them to return to the great principles of 1789, but without the dangerous radicalism of the emergency period of 1792–94.

Foremost among their goals was the return to a constitutional government, hence the steady abolition of the machinery of revolutionary government.

Use the QR code or visit the Interactive Textbook and watch the video summarising the chapter.



## Develop your historical-thinking skills

### Define key terms

Write your own definition of each of the following key terms:

- Thermidor
- Thermidorian reaction
- White Terror
- dry guillotine
- Executive Directory
- Constitution of 1795.

### Analysing cause and consequence

Using four or five main points, describe the powerful political forces affecting France during the period 1794–95, after the fall of Robespierre.

### Constructing historical arguments

To what extent did the ‘final settlement’ of the revolution in 1795 establish or destroy the hopes and ideals of 1789?

### Analysing historian’s interpretations

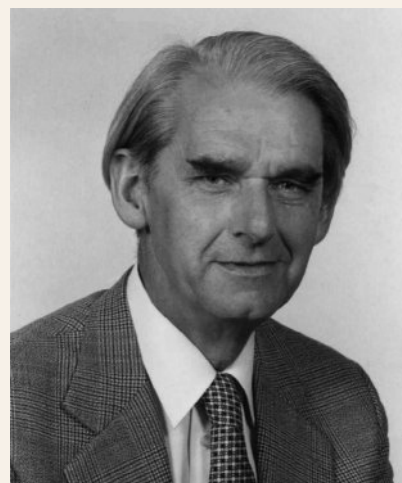
#### Norman Hampson (1922–2011)

Historian Norman Hampson wrote:

*The Constitution of 1795 ensured that the [Executive] Directory would be a weak government. It tried to apply liberal policies in a situation where war, inflation, food shortages and the whole violent legacy of the revolution made liberal government impossible. It has found few supporters, and historians have been reluctant to recognise either the achievements of these able men or the extraordinary problems that defeated them. They achieved outstanding military successes, but the country was ungovernable by normal constitutional methods.*

**Source 18.17** *The French Revolution: A Concise History*, 1975, p. 161

- 1 Why, according to Hampson, should we consider the Constitution of 1795 to be a good constitution in itself, but one that was created at the wrong time?
- 2 Why does Hampson feel that the situation in France around 1795 made a normal, moderate, democratic government impossible?
- 3 What evidence does Hampson give to prove that the members of the Executive Directory were very capable?



▲ **Source 18.18** Norman Hampson

## Using quotes as evidence

Write a sentence using a short phrase from one of the quotes below or contrast the views from a few of the quotes. You can also use any of the quotes in the chapter. Any quotes you choose can be used directly or paraphrased into your own words.

### Robespierre's final speech to the National Convention

*What a ghastly scheme for a man to conceive: to drive the members of the National Convention to cut their own throats in order to pave his way to absolute power! Others may see the ridiculous side of these charges. I can only find them horrifying.*

**Robespierre, denying his desire to become a dictator**

*The arms of Liberty must not be touched except by pure hands.*

**Robespierre, stating that action had to be taken against evil plotters**

*All factions thrive in the bosom of a great revolution.*

*It suited all sides to identify Robespierre personally with the atrocities that had been committed ... a preposterous 'black legend' about Robespierre was rapidly created and still remains the dominant image of the young republican today.*

**Peter McPhee, historian**

### On the Constitution of 1795

*The revolution, far from keeping its course, took a sharp rightward turn (it has even been argued that it stopped altogether). The sans-culottes were once more disarmed or disenfranchised, and the rulers of 1795 – the men of Thermidor – after a period of hesitation, tried to revive the principles of '89 on a new foundation.*

**George Rudé, historian**

*The problem facing the [National] Convention in the summer of 1795 was now very clear. Having routed the forces of both terrorism and royalism, it had to devise a constitution ... that would prevent the recovery of either. The principles of 1789 were not to be confused with those of 1793.*

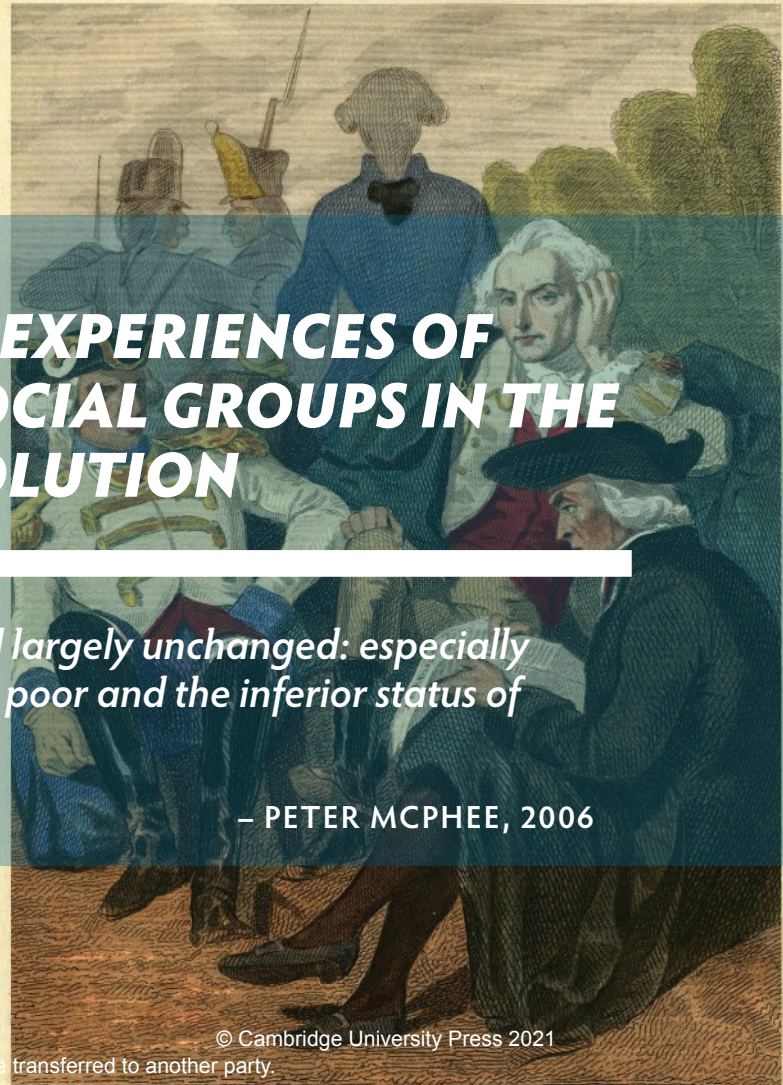
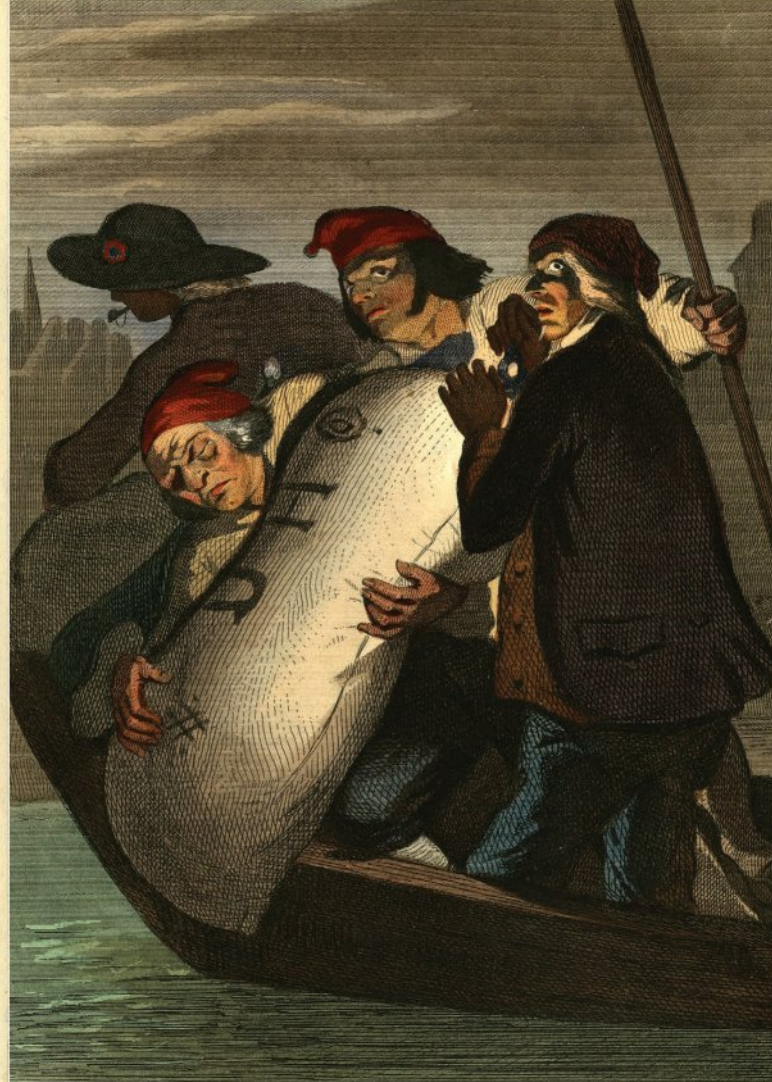
**William Doyle, historian**

*This constitution was a return to the provisions of the Constitution of 1791: France was again to be governed by representative, parliamentary government based on property qualifications and the safeguarding of economic and civil liberties.*

**Peter McPhee, historian**

*The revolution was by no means ended on 9 Thermidor ... the aspirations of the middle classes who made the revolution were only just beginning to come to fruition.*

**Martyn Lyons, historian**



# 19 THE DIVERSE EXPERIENCES OF DIFFERENT SOCIAL GROUPS IN THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

*The essentials of daily life continued largely unchanged: especially patterns of work, the position of the poor and the inferior status of women.*

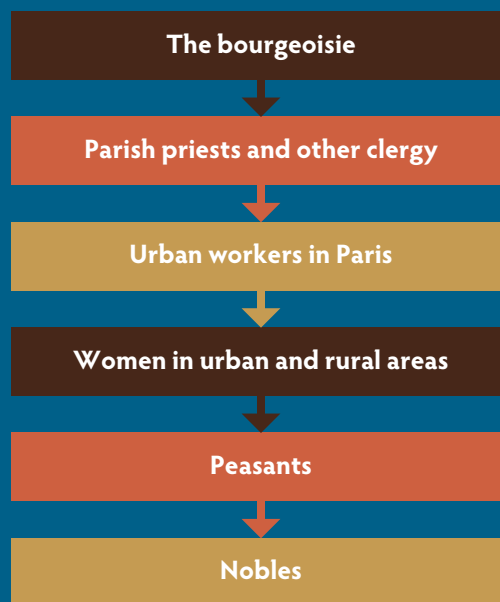
– PETER MCPHEE, 2006

## Overview

One of the most demanding aspects of our course of study is the requirement to know how different social groups experienced the French Revolution, how they responded to its challenges and how their everyday life was changed. We need to be able to answer these questions for any one – or combination – of the following groups:

- the bourgeoisie
- parish priests and other clergy
- urban workers in Paris
- women in urban and rural areas
- peasants
- the liberal and emigrated nobility.

## Flow of chapter



◀ **Source 19.0** Representations of people during the French Revolution by Léopold Massard, a nineteenth-century engraver

## 19.1 The bourgeoisie

Historian Jean-Pierre Hirsch argues that one class gained massively from the French Revolution: the bourgeoisie. He writes that the ‘Revolution was bourgeois inasmuch as the bourgeoisie gained the greatest advantages from it’. Similarly historian Tim Blanning states: ‘the social and economic policies of the National Assembly were ... manifestly favourable to the bourgeoisie’.

Specifically, the revolution affected the bourgeoisie in seven, mostly positive, ways.

### 1. The defence of private property

First, most bourgeois owned some private property, so they steered the revolution to protect their economic interests by firmly proclaiming that private property was sacred and could not be taken from the individual. All three constitutions enshrined this principle in law. Private property was only briefly threatened by the egalitarian demands by the *sans-culottes* and the enraged ones in the emergency period of 1793–94.



▲Source 19.1 A 1789 depiction of a public official in the role of magistrate

### 2. The triumph of meritocracy (merit over birth)

The French Revolution created equality of opportunity. It banned the practice of reserving senior appointments to nobles, making all employment open to the most capable applicant. This was of greatest benefit to educated, aspirational bourgeois. Historian William Doyle argues: ‘The bourgeoisie also gained from the revolution as the group from which the professions were recruited. The men of 1789 had proclaimed careers open to talents, believing neither birth nor wealth should give privileged access to any employment’.

#### KEY STATISTIC

In the 1780s, France’s central administration employed about 700 officials, but by 1794, with the demands of war, this had increased to 6000. The overall number of government employees was around one quarter of a million people, which is about 10 per cent of France’s entire bourgeoisie.



### 3. The triumph of free trade

The revolution benefited bourgeois manufacturers and traders by reviving internal customs barriers, and by introducing measures helpful to business, such as the system of uniform weights and measures. Peter McPhee has described how this helped the French economy to develop into a properly capitalist phase of production. He writes: ‘The free enterprise and free trade legislation of the French Revolution guaranteed that manufacturers, farmers, and merchants could commit themselves to the market economy secure in the knowledge that they could trade without the impediment of internal customs and tolls’.

### 4. The triumph of employer over employee

At a very early stage, the French Revolution declared itself strongly in favour of employers, and against the labour movement. The d’Allarde Law of March 1791 abolished the old guild system, and the Le Chapelier Law of June 1791 forbade any labour organisations, such as trade unions and strikes.

### 5. The sale of Church and noble lands

The successive sale of prime lands belonging to the Catholic Church and to emigrated nobles provided an unparalleled historical opportunity to wealthy bourgeois to buy land formerly locked up in privileged ownership. William Doyle argues: ‘The great gainers from the redistribution of church and noble property were the bourgeoisie’.

### 6. The impact of war and blockade on merchant traders

The French Revolution did indirectly cause some bourgeois to suffer. The War of the First Coalition included England and its mighty Royal Navy, which blockaded France’s trading ports such as Toulon, Toulouse, Marseille, Bordeaux and Nantes. This mercantile bourgeoisie, which ran ships in the Atlantic slave trade, found their businesses devastated by the closure of France’s ports. French external trade fell by 50 per cent from its 1789 levels. They responded to this by opposing the revolution, for example in the Federalist revolts across France in 1793.

### 7. The settlement of 1795

The conservative liberal republic of 1795 placed political power firmly and securely into the hands of very rich men, notably the wealthiest bourgeois. As Karl Marx noted, the French Revolution began in 1789 as an essentially bourgeois revolution and ended in 1795 as an intensely bourgeois regime.

### How did the bourgeoisie respond to the revolution?

- The bourgeoisie responded enthusiastically to the revolution because it promised them an opportunity to achieve their political and social goals, which were very much to their benefit.
- The bourgeois deputies of the Third Estate responded to the revolution by serving as deputies in successive national assemblies.
- The bourgeois deputies were willing to pass legislation to improve conditions for working people, primarily to win their support in the military emergency of 1792–93.
- When the military emergency was mostly resolved in late 1793–94, the bourgeois deputies sought to reduce popular radicalism and designed a conservative constitution that would limit political involvement only to very rich men – the Constitution of 1795.

## 19.2 Parish priests and other clergy

The French clergy exemplify a social group that suffered massive changes and devastating losses as a result of the revolution. William Doyle argues, 'the clergy were to suffer even more cataclysmically than the nobility.' Peter McPhee confirms, 'For virtually all the 140 000 priests, monks and nuns the revolutionary decade was a turbulent, terrifying and, for many, a tragic experience.'

The Catholic Church's losses were of three types: a massive depletion of property and income, a serious loss of power and prestige, and a tragic loss of human life.

### Supporters of the revolution turned into enemies

The devastation of the Catholic Church is regrettable because many lower clergy and some upper clergy, such as Talleyrand, were keen in 1789 to assist with the regeneration of the nation; they fully expected that the privileges and abuses of the existing Catholic Church would be redressed.

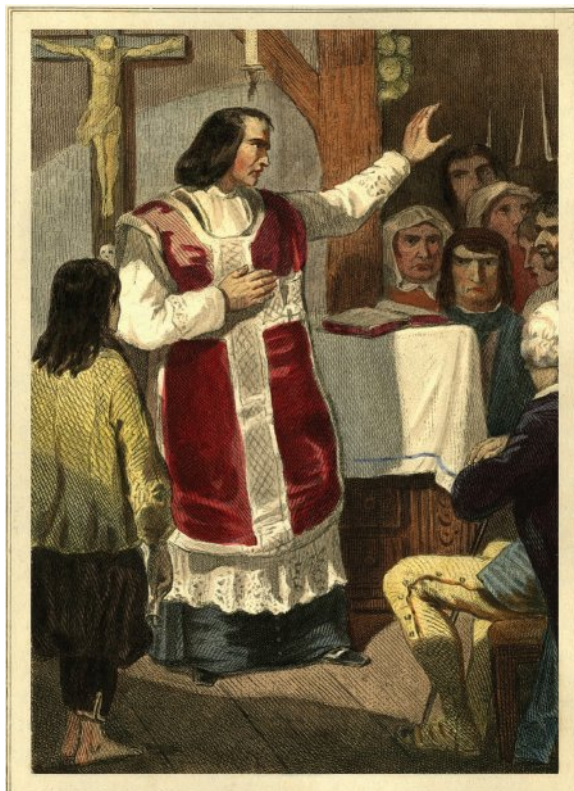
The positive responses and the support of these 'liberal clergy' had been crucial both theoretically, such as through the influence of Sieyès' *What is the Third Estate?*, and strategically, such as when the first clergy made common cause with the Third Estate at the Estates-General.

The clergy understood the need for reform in their Books of Grievances, demanding reform of specific abuses such as plurality and absenteeism. However, these documents did not suggest the full scale of the reforms that would be made to the Church after 1789.

Nonetheless, it was clergymen like Abbé Grégoire who further drove the process of reforming the Church by proposing the nationalisation and sale of Church lands. The Constituent Assembly's administrative restructure of the Church by the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, decreed on 12 July 1790, was intended to touch only the organisation of the Church and not spiritual matters.

The Constituent Assembly believed that as the sovereign power it could make changes without consulting the Pope (since the changes did not affect theology or liturgy) or the French Catholic Church. In this, they were wrong. Their error caused 30 bishops who were deputies to publish a protest that they could not support the reforms unless the Church had been consulted, either in the form of the Pope or a Church Council.

The clergy did lose the important practice of the contemplative life when most monasteries and convents were closed down. For France's 40 000 nuns, ejection from the shelter of the nunnery must have been a brutal and disorientating experience. Perhaps the greatest tragedy of the clergy was that many were converted from willing supporters of the revolution into opponents, and some suffered severe misfortune as a result; the French Revolution unintentionally caused its clerical supporters to be categorised as enemies.



▲ Source 19.2 A 1789 depiction of a non-juring priest delivering mass

Historian Jocelyn Hunt points out that ‘popular counter-revolutionary feeling was stirred first of all by changes planned for the Church.’ The National Assembly demanded a clerical oath of loyalty from 27 November 1790. Some 50 per cent of priests refused to take the clerical oath to declare their loyalty to the constitution, a figure that jumped to 60 per cent on average across France when the Pope later condemned the reforms on 13 April 1791. Priests who refused this oath were labelled ‘refractories’. Historian William Doyle argued that, tragically, ‘The oath of the clergy ... was certainly the Constituent Assembly’s most serious mistake. For the first time revolutionaries forced fellow citizens to choose: to declare themselves publicly for or against the new order’.

## Upper clergy, and monks and nuns

Apart from the mass of parish priests, the other clergy refers to two further groups: the upper clergy, and monks and nuns.

The upper clergy were the bishops and archbishops. They suffered a loss of virtually all the luxurious privileges they enjoyed under the old regime. The number of church regions was reduced to just 83, which meant a reduction in the number of bishops and archbishops. Worse, these positions were democratically elected rather than bestowed by the Pope.

The second group was the monks and nuns who had lived a peaceful life of prayer and meditation in sheltered communities called monasteries and nunneries. Most of these institutions were forcibly closed, throwing their members out into an everyday life that they barely understood. After February 1790, some 80 000 monks and nuns left their orders. Some were able to reinvent their lives, working as nurses or teachers; others never constructed a viable way of life. William Doyle believes that expulsion from religious orders might have been especially difficult for France’s 45 000 nuns.



KEY  
STATISTIC

Like the parish clergy, the monastic clergy suffered from the dangers of the revolutionary situation. In the northern town of Lille, for example, the nuns welcomed the invading Austrian troops as liberators, but when the French forces returned to the city, the nuns were all publicly murdered.

One notable exception of a member of the clergy who supported the French Revolution was Joseph Fouché. He not only accepted the revolution, but became one of its most important officials – a representative on mission – and went on to commit the mass murders in Lyon during the Federalist revolt of 1793.

## Official violence and popular violence

Priests were often the target of popular violence; for example, 220 clergy were among the 1200 people murdered in the September massacres in 1792. They were also targeted by official violence; for example, 1000 priests were executed during the Terror.



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STATISTIC

## Mass emigration

Peter McPhee believes that 30 000 to 40 000 priests – 25 per cent of clergy – quit France either by emigrating or being deported by the revolutionary government.

## Priest against priest

One of the most tragic outcomes was that the unified body of the clergy was also torn and divided, setting juring priests against non-juring priests. Thus, the clergy as human beings had been forced into what historian William Doyle calls ‘a bitter, tragic schism’.



## Fiscal and legal losses

In financial terms, the Catholic Church lost the tithe, which was abolished without compensation on 4 August 1789. In fiscal terms, the Church lost its right to calculate its own tax when the *don gratuit* was abolished. In legal terms, the Church lost its special courts. In social terms, the Church lost the influence it had enjoyed by providing education and social welfare, two important services taken over by the state. In religious terms, the Church lost its monopoly on religion, and was forced to operate alongside Protestants and Jews. It also lost its privileged position as an ally of the monarchy. Peter McPhee estimates that there were 3000 priests, and 4000 monks and nuns in the 1760s, but by 1796 this was reduced to just 400 priests.

## How did the clergy respond to the revolution?

- The clergy was, from a very early stage, remarkably sympathetic to many of the political and social principles outlined by the Third Estate.
- At the Estates-General, the clergy had strategically supported the Third Estate.
- The Civil Constitution of the Clergy divided the clergy almost equally – around 50 per cent took the oath nationwide.
- Juring clergy continued to support the revolution and to work within the new administrative framework of the Church. Some refractory priests responded by joining the counter-revolution.

► **Source 19.3** An anti-clerical caricature on the confiscation of the wealth of the Church: 'The abbot as he is today' (left) and 'The abbot in former times' (right)

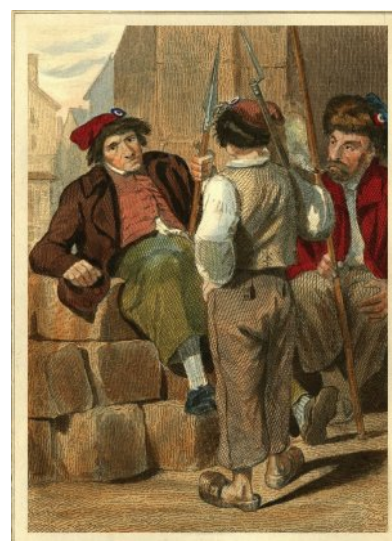


## 19.3 Urban workers in Paris

For urban working people, the French Revolution was arguably a failure, insofar as they made enormous contributions – notably by fighting in the nation's armies and by saving the revolution from defeat – and yet were ultimately deprived of the main benefits they hoped for. Peter McPhee contends: 'Among the initial supporters of the revolution, perhaps urban working people had sacrificed the most and gained the least. The *sans-culottes* of Paris, Marseilles and other cities had been the backbone of the revolution, but they gained few tangible benefits'. Specifically, the revolution affected them negatively in four ways.

### 1. Loss of labour rights

Whenever a new society is created, lawmakers face the task of deciding between the rights and needs of working people, and the interests of their employers. In the case of the French Revolution, the laws went heavily in favour of employers and against workers.



▲ **Source 19.4** A 1789 depiction of urban workers who have formed a militia.

The old guild system was abolished in March 1791 by d'Allarde Law, which also freed work for anybody who simply purchased a licence. The Le Chapelier Law of June 1791 provided an early sign that the French Revolution would always favour the employer over the employee, because it forbade labour organisations, such as trade unions, and strikes. Thus, the revolution permitted working people to fight and die in its armies, but would not give them the right to organise collectively for their own economic interests.

## 2. Tax relief

The urban artisans, master artisans, labourers, shopkeepers and lesser professionals who made up the *sans-culottes* briefly achieved the abolition of indirect taxes in 1789. They even managed to pressure the government to regulate pricing and wages during the emergency of 1793, but these reforms were rolled back by the Jacobins after the emergency had passed and were firmly denied by the government of 1795.

## 3. Food prices and shortages

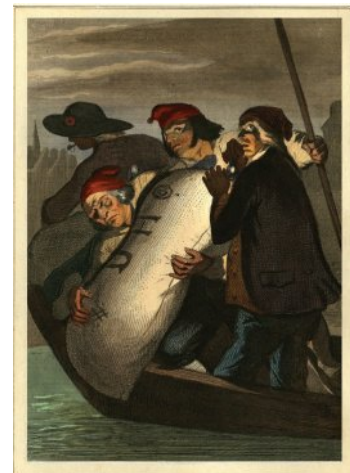
During the war emergency of 1792–94, urban workers supported the Jacobins and the war effort, and received in return the Law of the Maximum, which controlled the prices of key foods, then later the Law of the General Maximum, which controlled the prices of all foodstuffs. However, these gains were lost when, at the conclusion of the war crisis, the Jacobins cancelled the laws.

By 1795, urban working people again faced severe food shortages, which brought many close to starvation. Food prices had risen to 750 per cent of their level in 1790. Yet, when the popular movement attempted to assert its political demands for the democratic Constitution of 1793 and their economic demands for bread, as they did in the uprisings of Germinal April 1795 and Prairial (May 1795), they were brutally repressed. In the first uprising, some 4000 *sans-culottes* were arrested and after the second uprising, some 10 000 were exiled from France.



## 4. Loss of social welfare

Urban working people who suffered unemployment and poverty were amongst the worst affected by the revolution. The Church reforms of 1791 had deprived the Catholic Church of the resources even to provide the limited charity it used to give. Henceforth, under the radical and democratic Constitution of 1793, the state was to provide social welfare. But it failed to do so, primarily because it vastly underestimated the size of the group needing assistance. As Alfred Cobban has commented: 'Whoever won the French Revolution, they [the poor] lost'.



▲ Source 19.5 A 1789 depiction of a group of *sans-culottes* gathering grain

## How did urban workers in Paris respond to the revolution?

- The urban workers of Paris used their long tradition of direct crowd action to protect the new National Assembly from intimidation by the king's troops by capturing the Bastille, thereby forcing Louis XVI to compromise.
- Urban workers subsequently took on the role of 'guardians' of the revolution.
- Urban working men and women then used the 'revolutionary day' as a way of protecting the revolution at any point at which it was threatened.
- Urban workers became intensely involved in political clubs, societies and Paris section meetings.



- Urban workers also patriotically joined the army to defend France from foreign enemies.
- Working people took advantage of their importance to secure significant concessions in terms of the price of food.
- By 1795, urban workers had understood that they had been largely ignored by revolutionary reform, and responded by undertaking two major uprisings.

## 19.4 Women in urban and rural areas

Women were prominent in all the revolutionary uprisings of the revolution.

- They joined clubs and societies to educate themselves in political thought and to debate legislation.
- During the war emergency, women were prominent in ‘exhorting’ (encouraging men to enlist to defend the nation).
- In some rural areas, such as the Vendée, country women rejected the revolution because it had not served their interests (in terms of conscription and the sale of Church lands) and joined the forces resisting republican armies.

For more information on the experiences of urban and rural women during the French Revolution, refer to Chapter 18, which is dedicated to this topic.



◀ Source 19.6 A 1789 depiction of a group of *sans-culottes* women

## 19.5 Peasants

Historian Peter Jones writes, in his *The Peasantry in the French Revolution*, that peasants made three great gains from the French Revolution: the abolition of the feudal system, increased ownership of land, and access to a uniform, impartial system of justice for settling disputes.

### The abolition of feudal dues

Rural working people had taken their own revolutionary action from July to August in 1789, and had thereby precipitated the debate on feudalism that the National Assembly had so far avoided. While the initial sweeping abolition of the whole feudal system was later modified to a partial abolition with conditions of compensation and payout, the final complete abolition of feudalism in 1793 did represent a major benefit to the peasantry.

Feudal dues varied enormously across France, but it is calculated that peasants previously paid between 20–25 per cent of their income or produce to the lord, and they were now free of this burden. Peasants were liberated from the network of vexatious conditions such as the lord's dovecotes, the lord's hunting rights, as well as exploitative 'banalities' such as having to pay to use the lord's bridges, his mills and his ovens.

Peasants were also freed of the compulsory days of labour on the king's roads. They therefore regained the 8–10 per cent of their income that they usually paid as a tithe; the tithe was abolished immediately and without compensation to the lords.

### The redistribution of land

The French Revolution also addressed the peasants' other great grievance – that of land hunger. More than 50 per cent of peasants had not owned enough land from which to make a living and so had been forced into expensive, exploitative sharecropping agreements with landlords.

During the revolution, the early sales of Catholic Church lands did benefit some peasants, although the lots sold were so large that only wealthier peasants and bourgeois could afford to buy them. However, the later sales of noble lands were more sensibly made in smaller lots, and this did allow some peasants to acquire the land they needed.

Peter McPhee estimates that about 20 per cent of land – often the best – that had been tied up in Church and noble possession came onto the market, and became available to those peasants, bourgeois and even nobles who could afford it. For peasants specifically, McPhee believes, landowning rose from about approximately 33 per cent of land before the revolution to 41 per cent after the revolution. This is not a complete transformation, but it was a significant benefit to peasants.

Peter McPhee believes that peasants who owned their own land 'were amongst the direct and most substantial beneficiaries of the revolution', but admits that poorer peasants and sharecroppers continued to struggle. Overall, he feels that the English **revisionist historians** have underestimated the benefit to rural people of the abolition of feudalism.

Peasants were freed of feudal and church obligations, which previously took up a substantial percentage of their income.

 **KEY STATISTIC**



▲ **Source 19.7 A** 1789 depiction of a singer and town crier speaking out in a village

**revisionist historians** those who revised the standard Marxist interpretation, arguing that the revolution was not a class struggle between the bourgeois and noble, but a political revolution over constitutional principles



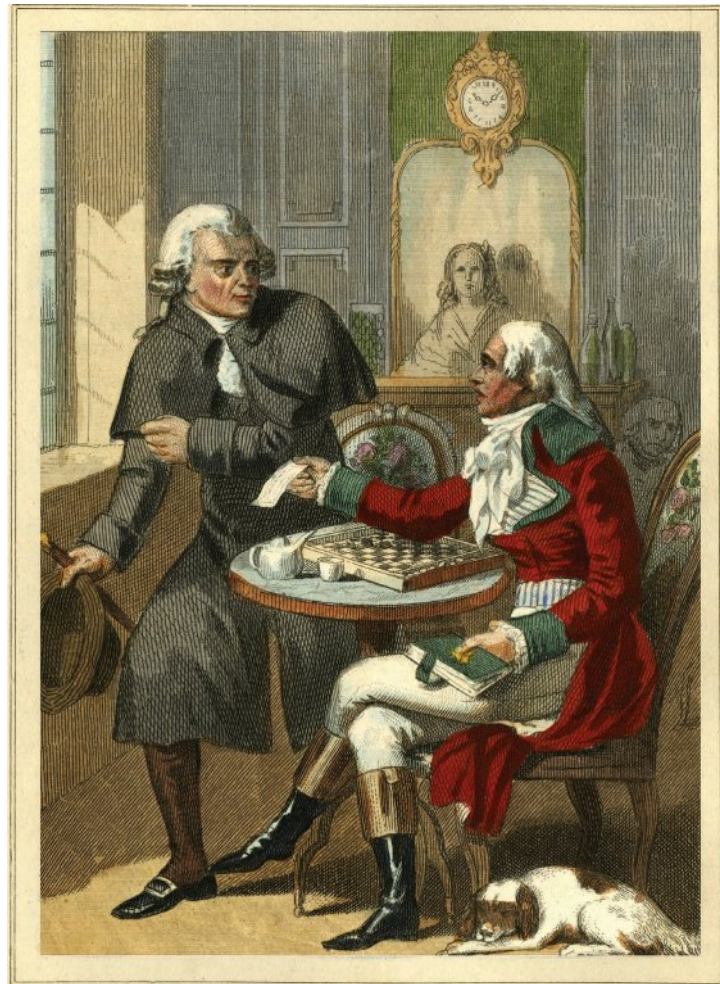
## How did peasants respond to the revolution?

- Peasants participated vocally in the drafting of the Books of Grievances because this gave them a chance to protest against vexatious burdens such as the tithe, feudal dues and banalities.
- When peasants realised that the National Assembly was not addressing their stated grievances with reform, they deployed their own tradition of collective action – in village groups – to attack nobles' estates and homes in the Great Fear (July to August 1789).
- Peasants quickly understood that the August Decrees of 1789 had lifted some burdens from them, such as the tithe, but had not actually abolished the feudal system.
- Peasants responded by simply stopping the payment of feudal dues en masse.
- In 1793, the obligation to buy out of the feudal system was formally abolished.

## 19.6 Nobles

Not *all* French nobles were opposed to the revolution and the revolution did not set out to systematically massacre all aristocrats. Although the revolution is often portrayed in popular fiction as a slaughter of the nobles, only 1200 aristocrats were actually guillotined in the Terror. Since just one human life is inestimably valuable, this is still a tragic occurrence, but compared proportionally to other victims, this group suffered quite lightly.

However, William Doyle and Peter McPhee note that many thousands more were imprisoned during the Terror, and suffered the trauma of imminent execution. As McPhee observes: 'While most nobles were pragmatic [practical] enough to withdraw from public life and to accept, however grudgingly, the institutional changes of the revolution, their losses too were massive'. Doyle, too, judges that 'nobles were the first, and the greatest, losers from the Revolution'.



▲ Source 19.8 A 1789 depiction of a nobleman with an *assignat*

Five of the most significant losses for nobles are outlined below.



## 1. Political losses

Doyle points out that the noble order's Books of Grievances showed 'an impressive willingness' to be involved in discussion of the regeneration of the nation, often at the cost of sacrificing some of their own interests. For example, the 60 members of the Society of Thirty, most of them nobles, made common cause with the Third Estate in calling for a constitutional monarchy in 1789. Politically, in June 1789 the nobles lost their corporate status, which had guaranteed them power through individual consultation.

## 2. Economic losses

Originally, idealistic nobles advocated for the reform of the feudal system and began the process by renouncing some of their own personal dues and privileges on 1–4 August 1789.



Economically, the nobility lost the benefit of thousands of pounds worth of feudal dues – decreed in August 1789, then fully implemented in 1793. Robert Forster calculates that these losses ranged from a mere 5 per cent of a noble's income in some areas, to 63 per cent of a noble's income in others. Peter McPhee cites the example of one noble estate that generated 16 000 pounds before 1789, but after the revolution could generate only 4700 pounds.



◀ **Source 19.9** A 1789 depiction of emigrated nobles waiting and planning their militant return



The nobles who emigrated suffered the loss of all or part of their properties, which were sold to bourgeois and to richer peasants. Peter McPhee estimates that there were some 25 000 noble families in France before the French Revolution, of whom at least 14 000 men emigrated. William Doyle estimates the number as 16 500, but suggests that there may have been several thousands more that have not been recorded. He believes that about 20 per cent of noble lands were sold off during the revolution and notes that some 12 500 noble families suffered sequestration of property in this manner. These sales would never be reversed, although when the nobles returned they were able to buy some of their lands back.

### 3. Legal losses

Nobles lost their right to special courts, and now found themselves tried by the same courts, judges and laws as the rest of the nation. Legal equality was unquestionably right in the new order, but for the nobles it meant a devastating loss of prestige and deference. To be questioned, tried and judged by commoners would have been profoundly humiliating for them.

### 4. Social losses

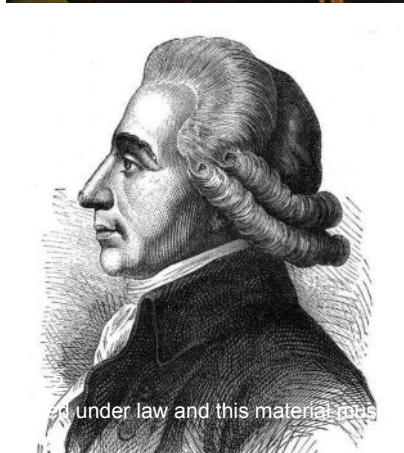
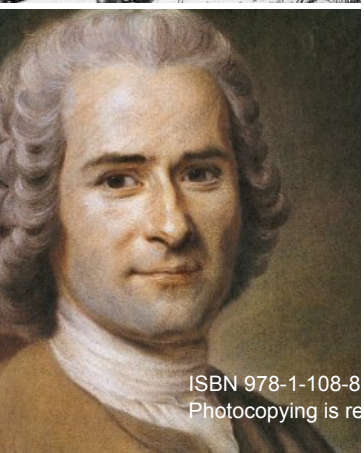
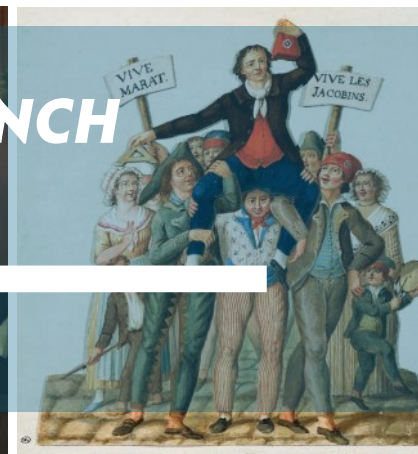
The nobles lost a great deal of their social prestige when the noble courts and the *parlements* were abolished, and when they were subjected to equal laws. Because of the elimination of the old culture of deference, they lost the profound respect and prestige they had enjoyed for centuries. In honorific terms, they lost the right to proclaim their noble titles, to demand respectful terms of address and to display noble coats of arms.

### 5. Financial losses

Nobles lost their generous tax exemptions and were forced to pay a universal proportional personal tax. Before 1789, they paid approximately 5 per cent of their incomes in tax; after 1789, they paid more like 12 per cent. The Marquise de la Tour du Pin estimated that her annual income had been reduced from 80 000 francs to 22 000 francs.

## How did nobles respond to the revolution?

- The majority of nobles simply accepted the new order and did not seek to challenge it.
- Liberal nobles were among the earliest and most vocal supporters of the principles of 1789. Nobles such as Philippe Duc d'Orléans, for example, used his property at the Palais-Royal to encourage free political speech and he used his money to commission pamphlets during the pamphlet war.
- Emigrated nobles responded in two main ways. Some were passive emigrated nobles, in that they simply left France to seek safety in another country. Nobles did not have to emigrate en masse: it was never the revolution's intention to drive them out as a class. About 16 500 (15 per cent of all nobles) quit France, either through caution, from some real threat or from simply being uncomfortable with the new order of things.
- Other nobles were active in the sense that they formed emigrated armies, notably at Koblenz, with the intention of helping the First Coalition invade France and crush the revolution.



20

# WHO'S WHO OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION



**Bailly, Jean-Sylvain**, was a moderate revolutionary leader who hoped to avoid conflict with Louis XVI at the meeting of the Estates-General, but who nonetheless led the walkout of the Third Estate deputies to the local tennis court, where he read the oath not to disperse until they had a constitution and a national assembly. He firmly stated that ‘the nation, when assembled, cannot be given orders’, thus establishing the principle of the sovereignty (authority) of the nation’s assembly.

**Barnave, Antoine**, was one of the most influential leaders of a group in the early Constituent Assembly. He argued passionately that France must have a constitutional monarchy. He also argued against giving the vote to people of colour on Saint-Domingue. By May 1791, his faction was outshone by a more radical group led by Brissot. After the flight to Varennes, he became unpopular because he was seen as being sympathetic to the king and queen, who had betrayed the revolution by their attempted escape from France.

**Boissy d’Anglas, François-Antoine de**, a moderate politician who helped write the Constitution of 1795, which ensured that government would then remain in the hands of very wealthy men only.

**Calonne, Charles-Alexandre de**, the minister of finance who recognised the need for sweeping reform of France’s taxes and finances, and who designed an ambitious plan to overcome France’s large national debt by making economies, improving the taxation system and introducing a single, proportional tax on wealth to be paid by all.

**Corday, Charlotte**, a revolutionary who supported the ideals of the 1789 revolution, but who was critical of the Jacobins’ use of Terror to silence their enemies and critics. She assassinated Marat as a protest against the increasing violence of the revolution during the emergency of 1792–93.

**Danton, Georges**, an energetic and determined revolutionary who assisted Robespierre in designing and implementing the emergency measures of the Terror to guide the revolution successfully through the crisis of 1792–93. Executed along with the Indulgents.

**David, Jacques-Louis**, a painter who turned his talent to organising the great public festivals and ceremonies of the revolution.

**Desmoulins, Camille**, a journalist who was proactive in urging the people of Paris to arm themselves for defensive military action from 12–14 July 1789. Desmoulins lost his life in 1793 when, with the other members of the Indulgents, he dared to suggest that the Terror should be terminated.

**Diderot, Denis**, a leading *philosophe* of the Enlightenment, and the main editor behind the large project of *The Encyclopaedia*, which featured articles critical of the political and social system of France.

**Dumouriez, Charles François** was a distinguished general who came out of retirement to lead France’s armies during the revolution. His greatest achievement was his leadership in the French victories of the Battle of Valmy and the Battle of Jemappes, but in April 1793 he fled France in the face of Jacobin hostility.

**Hébert, Jacques**, was a member of the radical Paris Revolutionary Commune and a fiercely democratic leader of the *sans-culottes* movement, whom he spoke to via his newspaper *Father Duchesne*. After the flight to Varennes, he became a republican, and led the extremely militant enraged ones.

**Loménie de Brienne, Étienne-Charles**, was a bishop in the upper clergy, but also showed talent in managing national finances. He attempted to continue Calonne’s idea of tax reform, but failed to persuade the Paris *parlement* to approve his plans, and was obliged to call a meeting of the Estates-General.

**Louis XVI**, the Bourbon King of France who had to manage the challenge of growing demands for political representation and taxation reform in France. In July 1789, he gave into revolutionary demands for a national assembly and then appeared to accept the role of a constitutional monarch. His most dangerous – and finally fatal mistake – was to betray his undertaking by attempting to flee France in 1791.

**Marat, Jean-Paul**, a very radical journalist who used his newspaper, *The Friend of the People*, to stir up popular action against 'enemies of the revolution.' He inspired the Parisian revolutionary crowd to defend the revolution by carrying out the September massacres in 1792 of imagined enemies in the prisons.

**Marie-Antoinette**, the Queen of France, and the centre of a court group opposing the revolution. She was widely – and quite wrongly – blamed for the national debt, due to her real and imagined spending on expensive clothing.

**Montesquieu, Charles-Louis de Secondat**, was an important political theorist who argued, in *The Spirit of the Laws*, that good government and liberty depended upon the separation of powers; that is, the independence of the executive (the government), the legislature (the parliament) and the judiciary (the legal system) from each other.

**Marquis de Lafayette, Gilbert de Motier**, a liberal noble who had served in the American War of Independence, and who supported the early stage of the revolution and its creation of a constitutional monarchy. One of his great achievements was the powerful ceremony of the Festival of Federation in 1790, which did much to create a sense of unity in the early stage of the revolution.

**Jacques Necker**, a Swiss Protestant banker who enjoyed the public's confidence as a competent financial manager. In 1781, he published his *Compte Rendu*, in which he was able to hide the enormous debt caused by the American War of Independence by failing to publish the repayments and only showing 'ordinary expenses'.

**Philippe, Duc d'Orléans**, a cousin of the king, who founded the Society of Thirty to advocate a constitutional monarchy.

**Comte de Mirabeau, Honoré Gabriel Riqueti**, a feisty politician who stood up to King Louis XVI during the confrontation at the Estates-General. It later emerged that he was also working as an agent for the king.

**Robespierre, Maximilien**, the most eminent and influential leader of the French Revolution, who understood the need to temporarily suspend the rights granted in 1789 and to introduce temporary emergency measures to guide the revolution through the crisis of 1792–93.

**Roland, Marie-Jeanne Philipon**, was a leading member of the Girondin faction. She supported the great revolutionary principles in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen in 1789, but protested against the use of Terror by the ruling Jacobin faction in the war emergency of 1792–93. She went to the guillotine for her convictions.

**Rousseau, Jean-Jacques**, was one of the most complex and troubled thinkers of the Enlightenment, who wrote brilliantly on a broad range of subjects. In terms of revolutionary history, his most important work was *The Social Contract*, which introduced the radical idea of the contractual basis of government.

**Roux, Jacques**, was a liberal clergyman who became politically radical and joined the extremist 'enraged ones'. His belief in crowd action against food hoarders won him popularity with the *sans-culottes*.

**Abbé Sieyès, Emmanuel-Joseph**, a member of the liberal clergy who wrote the influential pamphlet *What is the Third Estate?*, which argued that the deputies of the Third Estate should already regard themselves as the elected representatives of the nation and thus form a national assembly.

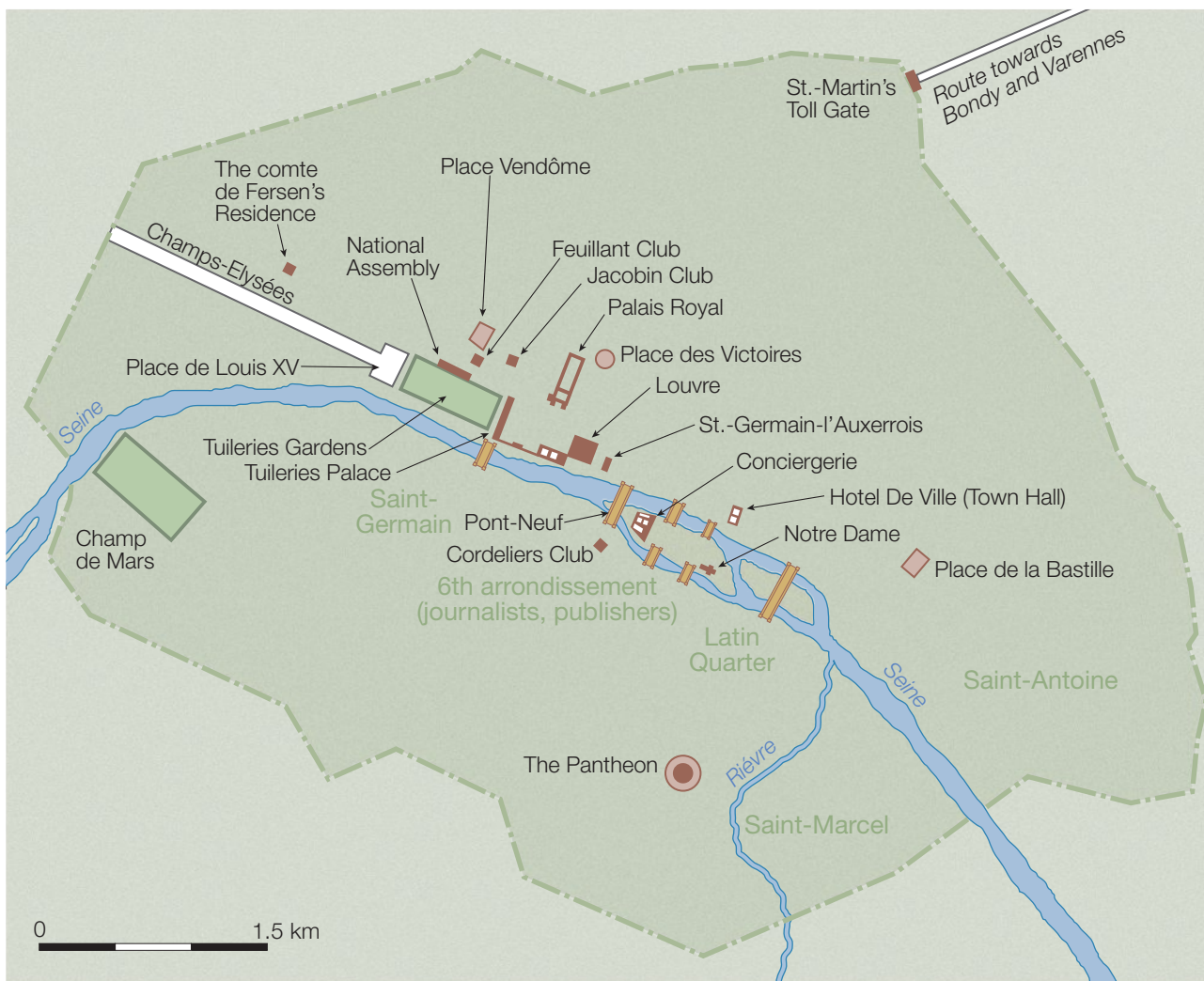
**Toussaint l'Ouverture, François-Dominique**, was a freed slave on the French plantation island of Saint-Domingue in the Caribbean. He successfully led a slave revolt against the masters and finally succeeded in forcing the French to abolish slavery.

**Voltaire, François-Marie Arouet**, was a leading thinker of the Enlightenment who praised the constitutional monarchy of England and suggested that France should have the same political system. He also argued powerfully against religious intolerance and the power of the Catholic Church.

## Appendix: Historical interpretations

This appendix offers guidance in analysing the differing views of various historians, each of whom has offered a particular interpretation of the revolution. Also included on *Cambridge GO* are practice examination questions relating directly to content in the book, which are designed to aid your preparation for VCE assessment. Above all, I hope that the book has offered you the opportunity to think critically about the revolution and to draw your own conclusions.

*Michael Adcock*



▲ Source A.1 A map of revolutionary sites in Paris

Please see *Cambridge GO* for a printable annotated map activity based on this map. This is designed for students to be able to recall and explain the importance of each of the key revolutionary sites in Paris.

### What to do and what to avoid

You are required to write about historical interpretations in school assessed coursework (SAC) and the examination; this topic is also known as 'historiography' (you may come across this word in your research). Writing about historical interpretations need not be difficult, providing you rehearse this skill regularly throughout your studies. You should ask your teacher to start explaining historians' opinions from the very first lesson, and to continue to do so throughout the year as your course unfolds. The quoting, discussion and analysis of the work of historians should happen naturally throughout all your discussions, and in your writing about the French Revolution.

There are some things you should definitely avoid doing. First, do not be tempted to write a set paragraph about groups of historians ('The revisionist school of thought argues X; the Marxist school of thought argues Y'), which you just insert in your answer no matter what the question actually is. This seems an easy and safe way of dealing with historians, but it is not likely to gain many marks.

Second, you should not just jam quotes into your answer (for example, 'It is resistance that makes revolutions become violent' – Doyle) without explaining in your own terms why you have included a particular quote.

## How to write meaningfully about historians' points of view

There is no quick fix for this task; you simply have to work hard to master it. Given that this is an important **discriminator**, it is well worth the effort. First, you will need to have a set of quotes for each major event in the revolution (for example, the French Revolution of 1789 – what caused it?) and for key issues (for example, The Terror – was it justified?).

**discriminator** a skill that justifies a high mark

Second, you need to find historians' views that vary; opposing views can be very powerful. You then need to learn to include them in your own explanation (for example, 'While Marxist historians tend to accept that the Terror was a necessary response to an emergency ...'). Sometimes you can even arrange three or four quotes on a spectrum of opinion. As you explain them, remember to use words like 'similarly' and 'by contrast' to show that you actually do understand how each historian stands in relation to the others.

Third, you will need to cut down long quotes from books into a short sentence or phrase that you can remember and write under pressure. If you can remember the quote exactly, quote it *directly*, and remember to open and close the quotation marks. If you cannot remember the quote, you may quote *indirectly*, but be sure to use the word 'that' (for example, 'William Doyle's argument *that* it is resistance that makes revolutions become violent ...').

## Study hint

Students sometimes feel overwhelmed by the task of finding a set of quotes suitable for each main event, document and person relating to the French Revolution. In some classes, students and their teacher arrange for group work, in which one group takes responsibility for just one event (say, the Capture of the Bastille), looks for the best possible quotes and notes them down. At the end of the search-and-find exercise, each group shares its set of quotes with the others, very quickly and efficiently creating a broad spectrum of citations.

## Examination hint

Some students find it useful to write out their favourite quotes in large text on A3 paper and post them on the walls of their room. This makes it easier to memorise the quotes. The technique is called ambient learning and it can be very effective.

## Some useful websites on historical interpretations

Wikipedia: Historiography of the French Revolution:  
<http://cambridge.edu.au/redirect/?id=9337>

Alpha History: French Revolution Historiography:  
<http://cambridge.edu.au/redirect/?id=9338>

Idea of History: R.G. Collingwood, Historiography of French Revolution.  
<http://cambridge.edu.au/redirect/?id=9339>

From Burke to Schama: The historiography of the French Revolution:  
<http://cambridge.edu.au/redirect/?id=9340>

History Today: Fifty Years of Rewriting the French Revolution:  
<http://cambridge.edu.au/redirect/?id=9341>

# Glossary

**absenteeism** the problem of bishops neglecting their appointments

**absolute monarchy (absolutism)** a political system in which the monarch rules personally, without being accountable to an elected parliament

**absolute power** gave the king ultimate control

**absolute veto** right to reject legislative enactments

**agency** power to make decisions for oneself

**altruistic** unselfish in relation to others

**American spirit** a wave of French public sympathy for the American struggle, which was expressed in popular plays, novels and paintings

**amnesty** guaranteed safe return

**arbitrary power or despotism** by which a king ruled badly, without respect for existing laws

**artisans** workers who were trained and skilled in some trade, such as barrel-making or glass-making, and who worked in small workshops in cities, towns and villages

**assignats** government bonds

**August Decrees** a document that abolished aspects of the feudal system and later ensured that peasants could buy their way out of feudal payments

**birth** an individual's status as either commoner or nobility, determined at birth

**Books of Grievances (*Cahiers de Doléances*)** lists of concerns drawn up by local meetings of the Three Estates across France before the meeting of the Estates-General in May 1789

**bourgeois** the individual members of the bourgeoisie

**bourgeoisie** people of the Third Estate who lived in towns, owned property and engaged in trade, industry or the professions

**Breton Club** a group of deputies from the region of Brittany, who recommended, then demanded, that the National Assembly abolish feudal dues on peasants

**Brissotins** the followers of the radical politician Brissot in the Legislative Assembly (1791–92); they advocated revolutionary war and punitive policies against refractory priests and emigrated nobles

**canton** a division of an area of France

**cockade** a bundle of ribbons in the revolutionary colours of blue, white and red, to be worn on a coat or hat to show that you were a patriot

**Committees of Surveillance (Watch Committees)** local meetings of patriots in the cities, towns and villages of France, given the responsibility for discovering enemies of the revolution

**Compte Rendu** Jacques Necker's 'National Account', which cleverly hid the true nature of France's crippling national debt, thus delaying by five years the inevitable process of trying to resolve it by reform of taxation

**constitutional monarchy** a political system in which the monarch rules in conjunction with a representative assembly

**convoked** called together for a large formal meeting

**Cordeliers Club** first known as Claude Dansard's Fraternal Society, the Cordeliers Club was the first society to admit women to political debates and give them equal voting rights

**corporate society** a society made up of a number of powerful groups, each enjoying its own special customs, laws and privileges

**corps** an organisation of military personnel

**corvée** under the old regime, a labour tax paid by working people

**Council of State** the king's cabinet of ministers

**counter-revolution** any movement aiming to oppose the revolution

**Dauphin** innocent young royal prince who was subjected to such physical and psychological mistreatment that he died in the Temple Prison in 1795

**decentralisation** counter-balancing the powerful central government with a network of local governments in the provinces

**deference** showing respect to your social betters

**demagogue** political leader who appeals to people's emotions to gain power

**democratisation** the process of opening up politics to ordinary people who had previously not been able to participate in the political life of the nation

**deposed** overthrown



**discriminator** a skill that justifies a high mark

**don gratuit** the contribution of the Catholic Church to the French state; the Church had the privilege of calculating how much it would pay on each occasion

**dossiers** sets of papers containing information

**dynasty** a sequence of monarchs going back hundreds of years

**ecclesiastical** involving the Christian church

**Enlightenment** a Europe-wide intellectual movement in the eighteenth century that criticised absolute monarchy and despotism, and attacked organised religion and its tendency towards intolerance

**enraged ones** (*les enragés*) an ultra-radical group produced by the *sans-culottes*

**epochal** an event significant in terms of history

**equality** all people receive uniform legal treatment and are part of a political body

**equality of opportunity** merit and utility over birth and privilege

**estate** (*état*) a system of social classification by function: the clergy's role was to pray (First Estate); the nobility's role was to fight (Second Estate); and the commoners' role was to grow food and provide soldiers for armies (Third Estate). Note that each estate was not just one social class, because it contained people ranging from the very poor to the very wealthy

**ferment** agitation or excitement due to changing conditions

**feudal dues** extra payments of money, food or labour to the nobles

**feudal system** medieval political and economic system

**First Coalition** an alliance formed by England that included Russia, Austro-Hungary and Spain

**fiscal concessions** privileges relating to taxes

**gabelle** during the old regime, a tax on salt, an item crucial to working people for preserving food and for the care of farm animals

**Girondins** a loose grouping of deputies around leaders such as Monsieur and Madame Roland, who competed with the Jacobins for control of the National Convention

**governors** otherwise known as *intendants*; chosen by the king to apply his policies in provincial France

**Great Fear** a serious rural rebellion that forced the National Assembly to abolish some of the feudal system

**Great Terror** the worst and final stage of the Terror

**highest courts of appeal** otherwise known as *parlements*; these 13 high courts checked and registered royal laws

**honorific** a certain type of privilege such as a noble's right to wear a sword in public

**incipient** beginning to develop

**Indulgents** an informal group among the Jacobins and the Cordeliers whose members argued that the war was essentially won after the Battle of Fleurus, and the Terror could be wound down

**insurrection** rebellion against the government

**Insurrection of 1 Prairal** a second attack on 20 May 1795 on the National Convention by desperate *sans-culottes* demanding the reduction of bread prices and the return of the Constitution of 1793; one deputy was murdered

**Insurrection of 12 Germinal** an attack on 1 April 1795 on the National Convention by the Parisian crowd, who demanded cheaper bread and the Constitution of 1793

**Insurrectionary Commune** The Paris Commune became the Insurrectionary Commune in August 1792, refusing to take orders from the central French government and instead giving a voice to extreme views of the people

**inviolability** that which is unable to be breached or broken

**Jacobin Club** the most famous and influential political club in the revolution, which developed into an extensive, nationwide network; led by Maximilien de Robespierre, at its height it controlled the government and directed the Terror of 1793–94

**jacquerie** the peasants' long tradition of riot

**Law of 22 Prairial** was enacted on 10 June 1794; it exceeded even the Law of Suspects in giving the committees power to arrest and execute people, and it eliminated deputies' parliamentary immunity

**Law of the General Maximum** economic policy that set a limit on the price of all essential goods

**Law of the Maximum** economic policy that set a limit on the price of wheat and flour

**Law of Suspects** expanded earlier definitions of the types of behaviour that could make a person suspect; it shifted the burden of proof onto the suspect

**legal concessions** privileges relating to the law

**legality** the rule of law

**legislature** law-making body

**legitimacy** sense of rightness

**lettres de cachet** letters or orders for arrest as signed by the king of France and closed with the royal seal

**lit de justice** a formal process by which the king ordered the *parlement* to convene so he could use royal authority to command the *parlement* to register a decree

**local vigilantes** people who keep watch for unlawful activity

**lower clergy** parish priests and assistants, who earned only £750 yearly

**martyred** when someone is killed for refusing to deny a strong belief

**mercenary** professional soldier who is paid to fight

**merit** combination of an individual's personal abilities

**militia** a fighting force made up of non-professional soldiers

**most useful class** a proposed bourgeois estate (comprising magistrates, lawyers, doctors, landowners, merchants and traders) that would form a new Second Estate

**municipal revolution** after the Parisian revolution (July 1789), revolutionaries in the provincial cities overthrew royal officials and created elected governments

**muscadins** lavishly dressed men who adopted a virtual uniform (square-cut coats, tight trousers into low boots, flamboyantly high collars and cravats) as a rejection of the Jacobin taste for simplicity

**National Assembly** a legislative body formed with the task of writing the constitution and forming laws

**National Guard** a force made up of reliable bourgeois citizens to protect private property

**noblesse d'épée** older 'nobility of the sword'

**noblesse de robe** more recent 'nobility of the robe'

**non-juring clergy (or refractory clergy)** priests who refused to swear the oath of loyalty to the revolution required by the Civil Constitution of the Clergy

**no taxation without representation** the idea that a monarchy cannot impose taxes without approval from representatives in parliament who pay those taxes

**old regime** French society before the revolution

**parlements** the highest courts of appeal in France

**peasants** these were members of the Third Estate who lived and worked in the country, and engaged in agricultural work; some were wealthy and some moderately well-to-do, but many were poor sharecroppers who did not own enough land to make a living and had to rent it from their local lord

**permanent popular movement** people will continually be actively involved in politics, meeting regularly at the popular level

**perpetual taxes** taxes occurring over and over

**philosophes** the writers, or critical thinkers, who highlighted reason

**philosophie** the system of ideas, emphasising science, progress and reason to create a more humane world, practised during the Enlightenment

**Phrygian bonnet** copied from the red hat worn by the slaves of ancient Rome once they had been freed

**pluralism** the practice by which a bishop could hold more than one appointment in different parts of France

**popular sovereignty** the right to be involved in political life

**pragmatism** a practical way of thinking about things

**privileges** special rights in matters of law and taxation

**propertied classes** those who own property

**public perceptions** commonly accepted beliefs

**quorum** minimum number of people needed for a meeting

**radicalised** having adopted radical political views

**rationalisation** practical application of what the *philosophes* had called reason

**religious orthodoxy** the idea that one religion can be declared right and all other religions wrong

**remonstrance** a memo from the law courts to the king, pointing out a problem in the wording of a law

**representation** the political idea that people cannot be expected to obey laws for which they have not voted

**revisionist historians** those who revised the standard Marxist interpretation, arguing that the revolution was not a class struggle between the bourgeois and noble, but a political revolution over constitutional principles

**revolt of the bourgeoisie** Tennis Court Oath

**revolt of the nobles** Assembly of Notables

**revolt of the notables (aristocratic revolt)** the stage in the revolution when privileged orders resisted the royal government's attempts at fiscal reform

**revolt of the popular movement** capture of the Bastille

**revolutionary government** temporary emergency measures to deal with the threat to the revolution

**revolutionary violence** the use of intimidation, physical violence and execution to deal with people who opposed the revolution

**right to insurrection** working people can overthrow the government if it is not defending their interests

**Robespierre** French revolutionary who was leader of the Jacobin Club and architect of the Terror

**salon** intellectual gathering of high society in private mansions

**sans-culottes** a general name for the militant working-class movement during the revolution; originally meant someone who didn't wear stylish clothing (*culottes*)

**sections** municipal meetings

**sedition** involving rebellion against a government or other authority

**seigneurial** semi-feudal system of land distribution

**self-sublimation** eliminating personal interests in favour of the public interest

**Society of Revolutionary Republican Women** a radical female partner to the Jacobin Club

**subversive** designed to overthrow a government or other institution

**suffrage** the right to vote

**suspensive veto** the ability of the king to delay law for four years

**tax farmers** private tax collectors

**tax farming** the collection of royal taxes by individuals on behalf of the government

**taxation by representation** taxes that have been discussed and approved by the elected representatives of the people who are going to have to pay these taxes

**Terror** the deliberate use of violence by government to discourage and repress its enemies

**the Mountain (*la Montagne*)** referred to as such because they (the Jacobins) sat up in the higher seats of the National Convention

**the Plain (*le Marais*)**, or the uncommitted majority, referred to as such because they sat lower down in the National Convention and mid-way between the two other groups

**Thermidorian reaction** a campaign during 1794–95 to destroy the Jacobins' control of politics, stop the processes of the Terror, and eliminate working people and women from political life

**Thermidorians** the revolutionaries who organised the coup against Robespierre, and the arrest and rapid execution of the leader and his closest followers

**tithe** a tax of between 8 and 10 per cent of people's income or of the value of their crops and livestock, paid to the local Catholic priest

**transcending** go beyond a limit or range

**uniformity** the quality or fact of being the same

**utility** usefulness, in terms of productive labour

**venal public office** the legal purchase of public office, often with a noble title attached, by wealthy and ambitious bourgeois who wanted to rise into the Second Estate

**Versailles** the palace that housed French kings from 1682, when Louis XIV moved the royal seat of power from Paris, to early in the revolution in 1789 (by then Versailles had become a symbol of all that was wrong with the old regime)

**vetoed** blocked an action through power or right

**vivre noblement** living off investments like a noble

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