

## Stages of the French Revolution

### I. Stage 1: Revolution of 1789 (1789-1792)

The first stage of the revolution began because of the long festering conflict between the monarchy and the aristocracy. King Louis XVI needed to raise taxes in order to pay the government's large debt. Of course, the nobles refused and demanded that the Estates General be called to determine whether the tax should be collected. The aristocracy believed, because the Estates General voted by order, that the tax would be defeated. When the Estates General met in Versailles during the summer of 1789, the Third Estate broke away. Its members, who were primarily from the upper middle class (bourgeoisie) felt that they were not adequately represented. They demanded voting by head and greater representation. The nobility certainly did not expect this to happen!

Upon breaking away, they formed the National Assembly (which later became the National Constituent Assembly). The National Assembly demanded a written constitution. Louis initially refused to acknowledge the new governmental body. However, because of pressure from the populace in both the cities and the countryside (e.g., the storming of the Bastille and the "Great Fear"), he eventually accepted the National Constituent Assembly.

After being recognized by the king, the National Constituent Assembly went about restructuring France. The Constitution of 1791 created a Constitutional Monarchy. The new legislative body would be the Legislative Assembly. The executive branch would be the king. Louis XVI, however, had little power. The first stage of the revolution was conservative when compared to other stages of the Revolution. It did, however, represent the death of the Old Regime and effectively transferred power from aristocratic wealth to all forms of commercial wealth.

#### A. Governmental Bodies

1. Estates General
  - a. ceased to exist after the Third Estate broke away
2. National Constituent Assembly
  - a. initially was called the National Assembly
  - b. was made up of the Third Estate, most of the First Estate (clergy) and liberal members of the Second Estate (the nobility)
  - c. ceased to exist after restructuring France
3. Legislative Assembly
  - a. legislative body of the new constitutional monarchy
  - b. members had to own a certain amount of property
  - c. had a brief existence (1791-1792)

#### B. Players and Political Factions

1. Aristocracy
  - a. Conservatives refused to join the National Constituent Assembly and supported an absolute monarchy
  - b. Liberals sided with the National Constituent Assembly
2. Clergy
  - a. under the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, all bishops and priests became employees of the state
3. The Middle Class (bourgeoisie)
  - a. only those who owned property had political power in the new government
4. The Populace
  - a. contrary to popular belief, it was not the populace that rebelled to overthrow the king
  - b. rather, the populace became a tool of the various political groups vying for power during the revolution
  - c. it was the people who forced Louis XVI to accept the National Constituent Assembly

#### C. Important Events

1. Tennis Court Oath
  - a. the National Assembly met on a tennis court at Versailles and refused to leave until the king agreed to accept a written constitution

2. Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen
  - a. declared that all French citizens were subject to same and equal laws
3. Constitution of 1791
  - a. set up a Constitutional Monarchy
  - b. did not recognize social or political equality
    - 1) members of the National Constituent Assembly did not desire social equality or extensive democracy
    - 2) wanted to lessen the influence of the unpropertied class on the new government

## II. Stage 2: Second Revolution (1792)

Many felt that the revolution had not gone far enough. In particular, the radical Jacobins (the Mountain) wanted a republic instead of a constitutional monarchy. The more moderate Jacobins (the Girondists) desired to preserve the new government.

Because 1) Louis XVI did many things to raise suspicion that he was a counterrevolutionary, 2) the poor economy, 3) the fact that most of France had no political power, and 4) a war with Austria and Prussia, the Mountain was able to gain control of the Legislative Assembly. Again, the populace played a part. With the help of the *sans-culottes* (the common people of Paris), the Mountain ousted the Girondists and transformed France into a Republic. The new legislative body was called the Convention. The Legislative Assembly ceased to exist.

It was during this stage that Louis XVI was tried and executed as a counterrevolutionary.

- A. Political Bodies
  1. Convention
    - a. replaced the Legislative Assembly
    - b. members were picked by universal male suffrage
    - c. would last until 1795
- B. Players and Political Factions
  1. Jacobins
    - a. members of the Third Estate and National Constituent Assembly who had favored a republic rather than a constitutional monarchy
  2. Girondists
    - a. moderate Jacobins
    - b. initially controlled the Legislative Assembly
    - c. desired to preserve the government established after the Revolution of 1789
  3. Mountain
    - a. radical Jacobins
    - b. with the help of the *sans-culottes* gained control of the Legislative Assembly
    - c. driving force behind the Second Revolution
  4. *Sans-culottes*
    - a. Parisians (shopkeepers, artisans, factory workers, and wage earners) who felt the revolution was moving too slowly
- C. Important Events
  1. The monarchy ends when France becomes a Republic
  2. France goes to war with Austria and Prussia (1792), and, eventually, declares war on most of Europe (1793)

## III. Stage 3: The Reign of Terror (1793-1795)

This was, by far, the most radical phase of the French Revolution. The war with Europe created a situation that allowed the Convention to crush opposition in France without due process of the law. No one, from royalists to republicans was safe.

The new government attempted to create a "Republic of Virtue." This new republic was essentially a military state whose main objective was preserving the new government and destroying all aristocratic elements and traditions.

- A. Political Bodies
  - 1. Convention
    - a. this was the legislative branch of the new government
  - 2. The Committee of Public Safety
    - a. this was the executive branch of the new government
    - b. the Committee was responsible for finding enemies of the new government
    - c. because of the war, had almost dictatorial power
- B. Players and Political Factions
  - 1. Mountain
    - a. controlled the Convention (with the help of the *sans-culottes*)
  - 2. Robespierre
    - a. as leader of the Committee of Public Safety, essentially controlled France from 1793 to 1794
    - b. executed all those (both radical and conservative) who opposed him or opposed the Republic of Virtue
  - 3. *Enrages*
    - a. radical *sans-culottes* who opposed the Republic of Virtue
- B. Important Events
  - 1. *levee en masse* (1793)
    - a. conscripted French males and directed economic production to military purposes
    - b. example of nationalism
  - 2. "Republic of Virtue"
  - 3. Revolutionaries eventually turned against each other

#### IV. Stage 4: The Thermidorian Reaction and the Establishment of the Directory (1795-1799)

This was a backlash against the radical elements of the revolution. The political pendulum swung back to the right and a government that was neither a constitutional monarchy nor a democracy was established. Social change was avoided. When all was said and done, the real "winners" of the French Revolution were the owners of property.

- A. Political Bodies
  - 1. Legislative Branch (bicameral)
    - a. Council of Elders
    - b. Council of Five Hundred
  - 2. Executive Branch
    - a. The Directory
- B. Players and Political Factions
  - 1. Property owners
    - a. the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy re-established power
    - b. along with soldiers, were the only citizens allowed to vote or hold office
  - 2. Jacobins
    - a. many were executed
  - 3. *sans-culottes*
    - a. completely ousted from the political scene
  - 4. Royalists
    - a. along with radical democrats (who wanted universal male suffrage), caused problems for the new government
- C. Important Events
  - 1. Constitution of the Year III
    - a. set up the new government and a limited democracy
  - 2. The new government relied on the military to keep order and stability