

Timeline of the French Revolution and Napoleonic Era – 1789-1815

Causes

Long-term:

- By 1789 many French peasants had become critical of the monarchy. They resented the rising and unequal heavy tax burden taxes (**taille**), the persecution of religious minorities, and government interference in their private lives.
- Waste and corruption of the entire **Ancien Regime** (Old Regime aka Catholic clergy & nobles), especially at the royal court of **Versailles**
- Spread of Enlightenment; **philosophes** argued that people had certain natural rights and that governments existed to guarantee these rights. They ridiculed the Old Regime's inefficiencies and its abuses of power and spoke of liberty, rights; and the nation.

Short-term:

- The cost of the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-1748), loss in Seven Years' War (1756-63) & assistance provided during the American Revolution (1775-81) → high war debt; by 1787, massive budget deficits (expenses = 600 million livres, revenue = 475 million livres – ½ of revenue goes just to pay interest on loans)
- 1788-1789 – bad winters → crop failures → bread shortages (one loaf of bread = a month's wages!) → mass starvation → the **Great Fear** gripped the nation as violence in both the cities and the countryside during the spring and summer of 1789

Phase 1: From Absolute Monarchy to Constitutional Monarchy

1789

May 1 - First meeting of the **Estates-General** in 175 years; Little was accomplished for five weeks as the assembly debated over proper meeting and voting procedures.

1. First Estate: Clergy (1% of pop.) 33% of vote
2. Second Estate: Nobles (1% of pop.) 33% of vote
3. Third Estate: Everyone else (98 % of pop.) 33% of vote

June 17 - Third Estate becomes **National Assembly**; The third estate took the initiative by inviting some members of the clergy and nobility to join them in a single-chambered legislature where the voting would be by head.

June 20 - Tennis Court Oath; when the National Assembly arrived to their regular meeting place, they found it locked in preparation for a royal function. Interpreting the lockout as a move to destroy their movement, the National Assembly moved their meeting to a nearby indoor tennis court. They swore not to disband their assembly until France had a constitution.

July 14 - Storming of the Bastille → National Guard; The king moved troops around Paris and many people thought he sought to undo the progress of the National Assembly. Fearing the king's soldiers, a Parisian mob looking for weapons, stormed the Bastille, a royal armory and prison. The Bastille had stood throughout the Middle Ages as a symbol of the king's power. The attack on it marked a turning point - attempts at reform had become a full-scale revolution.

Aug. 26 - The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen recognized the sovereignty of the people and attacked the notion of the divine right of kings. The revolutionaries believed the French nation was not a group of royal subjects but a society of equal citizens.

Oct. 5 - A crazed mob conducted a March on Versailles and captured the royal family. Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette were moved to Paris and became virtual prisoners of the National Assembly. The National Assembly turned its attention to writing a new constitution modeled after British constitutional monarchy.

Phase 2: From Constitutional Monarchy to the First Republic

1791

June 20 - Royal family attempts to flee to Austria; stopped at border and forcibly returned to Paris.

Oct. 1 - National Assembly → **National Convention**

1792

April 20 - Concerned about the potential effects of the Revolution on their own kingdoms, Austrian Emperor Francis II and Prussian King Frederick William II declared a willingness to intervene militarily on behalf of the French monarchy. The declaration provoked deep fears of an invasion. The National Assembly struck first and declared war against Austria and Prussia.

Aug. 10 - Attack on Tuileries Palace; The Convention lost influence due to the chaos of war and revolution. Political power shifted to the **Paris Commune**, a city council dominated by the **sans-culottes**, a group of shopkeepers and artisans fiercely dedicated to the Revolution and universal male suffrage.

Sept. 2-6 - **September Massacre** of prisoners

Sept. 20 - **Battle of Valmy** → tide of war against Austria & Prussia begins to turn

Phase 3: The First Republic, radical Jacobin dictatorship

1792

Sept. 22 - Abolition of monarchy → birth of **First French Republic**

1793

Jan. 21 - Execution of Louis XVI; Radical **Jacobins** allied with the sans-culottes found Louis XVI guilty of treason and voted (by a margin of one vote) for his immediate execution via **guillotine**.

Mar. 11- The Convention declared war against Britain and the Netherlands. The French met defeat after defeat. A counter-revolutionary rebellion erupts in Vendee.

July 27 - Another bad harvest caused further economic crisis and starvation. Revolutionary leaders turned on one another. The Jacobins seized power and created a 12 man dictatorship led by **Maximilien Robespierre** called the **Committee for Public Safety** until France was secure. The Committee called for a **Reign of Terror** to use extreme violence to solve the Republic's crisis.

Oct. 1793 – June 1794 – Reign of Terror → 500,000 people imprisoned; 40,000 executed by guillotine or die awaiting execution; 100,000-125,000 massacred in **Vendee**. Robespierre had anyone he considered too moderate in their political views charged with "crimes against liberty." The Reign of Terror was the most radical phase of the Revolution, and it remains the most controversial. Some historians see it as a major advance toward modern democracy, while others call it a step toward modern dictatorship. The violence and authoritarian methods used during the Reign of Terror have been adopted by revolutionaries on either end of the political spectrum – from Communists to Fascists. Karl Marx modeled his dream of a worker's revolution on the French Revolution and it has directly served as a model to the Russian Revolution, the Chinese Revolution, the Cuban Revolution, and many others.

Aug. 23 - **Mass conscription** begins; A draft, the seizure of grain from farmers, and price fixing helped save the Republic. A reorganization of the army led to a series of military victories. By 1794, France had repelled Austrian, Prussian, British, and Spanish invasions.

Oct. 5 - **Revolutionary calendar**

Oct. 16 - Execution of Marie Antoinette

Dec. 18 - **Siege of Toulon** ends - **Napoleon Bonaparte** drives the British fleet from the harbor and liberates the important port. At the age of 24, he is a national hero.

1794

July 27 - **Thermidorian Reaction**: Execution of Robespierre, Terror ends; Mass executions led Robespierre to a loss of political support. On July 27, 1794, he and 82 of his followers were arrested and sent to the guillotine themselves. The Terror was ended and thousands of prisoners were released.

1795

Oct 5 - An angry mob of counter-revolutionaries threatens to topple the revolutionary government. Napoleon fires cannons into the crowd and the government is saved. Napoleon gains national fame and his marriage to **Joséphine de Beauharnais** elevates him to new social heights.

Phase 4: The First Republic, moderate Directory Era

Oct. 26 - End of the National Convention → **the Directory** based on limited democracy – only the 30,000 wealthiest men in France could vote.

1796

Apr. 12 - The **Italian Campaign**: Napoleon is given command of the French forces fighting in Italy and forces Austria to surrender. He negotiates the peace treaty himself which allows France keep its conquests. Rumors of a military coup by Napoleon begin. French Revolutionary armies occupying territories in Italy leads to Italian nationalist groups organizing.

1798

May 12 - The **Egyptian Campaign**: to disrupt British trade with India, Napoleon invades and conquers Egypt.

July 21 - Napoleon wins **Battle of the Pyramids**; French troops make a great discovery: the **Rosetta Stone**. Scholars with Napoleon's expedition begin to unravel the mysteries of ancient Egypt's history.

Aug. 1 - British **Admiral Horatio Nelson** wins **Battle of the Nile** by destroying the French ships transporting the army. The French forces are stranded.

Phase 5: The Consulate, modern enlightened dictatorship

1799

Nov. 9-10 - **Coup d'état** by Napoleon → the **Consulate**; Napoleon leaves his army and returns to Paris. There, he joins a conspiracy to conduct a coup d'état - a plot to overthrow the Directory, seize power, and establish a new government. Napoleon is named first consul and holds dictatorial powers with far more than any French king had ever possessed. "The Revolution is over. I am the Revolution."

1800

June 14 - The **Battle of Marengo**: Napoleon secures his power by crossing the Alps and defeating the Austrians eventually forcing Austria to sign the **Treaty of Luneville**.

1802

Mar. 27 - The **Peace of Amiens** with Britain

1803

May - War resumes with Britain

1804

Mar. 21 - French law is standardized in the **Napoléonic Code**. This guarantees the rights and liberties won during the Revolution - the abolition of serfdom, slavery, inherited privilege, and judicial torture.

Phase 6: The First French Empire

Dec. 2 - Napoleon crowns self “**Emperor of the French**”

1805

Aug. - Britain, Austria, and Russia form coalition against France; Napoleon assembles 200,000 battle-hardened veterans to invade Britain. But before the French can launch ... Austria and Russia declare war!

Oct. 21 - Admiral Nelson defeats the French fleet at the **Battle of Trafalgar**. This British victory puts an end to Napoleon's plans for invading England. Nelson is mortally wounded, however, and dies as the battle draws to a close.

Dec. 2 - French defeat Austria and Russia at **Battle of Austerlitz**; Napoleon quickly marches his army 1000 miles, defeats the Austrians, and occupies Vienna! Vastly outnumbered, Napoleon defeats a combined Austrian and Russian army using superior tactics. It is his finest victory. His throne is secure and he is master of Europe.

1806

Nov. 21 - **Continental blockade** of Britain begins; Napoleon orders a complete stop to trade with Britain by all European nations in order to starve the island nation.

1807

July 7-9 - Napoleon signs peace **Treaties of Tilsit** with Prussia and Russia. French Revolutionary armies in Germany leads to the rise of German nationalism.

1808

July - Joseph Bonaparte appointed king of Spain; Spanish rebel → **Peninsula War** and the rise of Spanish nationalism.

1812

Sept. 14 - **Tsar Alexander** refuses to cut off trade with Britain. Napoleon invades Russia with his Grande Army of over 500,000 men. Napoleon reaches Moscow

Oct. - Napoleon begins retreat. Only 10,000 men survive the Russian invasion.

Phase 7: Restoration of the Bourbon Monarchy

1814

Apr. 6 - Facing overwhelming odds, Napoleon's marshals refuse to fight on. Napoleon abdicates → exile to **Elba**

Sept. - An international conference is held to re-draw the borders of Europe at the **Congress of Vienna**. For thirty years after the Napoleonic Wars, the **Austrian Prince Klemens von Metternich** dominated European politics. He was a conservative who worked to crush revolutionary ideals and restore power to kings and the traditional privileged classes of society.

1815

March - Napoleon escapes → 100 days; When he reaches France, the restored Bourbon king, **Louis XVIII**, sends an army to capture Napoleon who instead persuades the troops to follow him. Napoleon triumphantly returns to Paris and reigns for a **Hundred Days**.

June 18 - Battle of Waterloo; Napoleon fights his last, desperate battle. **Arthur Wellesley, the Duke of Wellington**, leads a coalition of European forces against Napoleon. Napoleon is delivered a final, devastating defeat.

1821

May 5 - Napoleon is exiled to **Saint Helena**, a remote island in the south Atlantic. He dies on May 5, 1821. Napoleon believed he had preserved the achievements of the French Revolution and shared the benefits with Europe. His goal, he said, was to create a European state - a "federation of free peoples." Napoleon's remains are returned to France. He is honored as a great hero.

1848

Metternich only delayed Europe's fate. The Revolution's ideas had taken hold. In 1848, Europe erupted in revolutionary chaos.