

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION AND THE NAPOLEONIC ERA

The French Revolution (1789–1799) was a major event in the struggle against absolutism in Europe. It produced new and important ideas about government and society. It also brought Napoleon Bonaparte, one of the most remarkable men in history, to the attention of the world.

1. Problems of the Old Regime. France during the 1700's had three major problems: inequality, insolvency, and injustice.

a. Inequality. French society was divided into three groups called estates. The clergy and nobles made up the First and Second Estates respectively. Many of these people lived in luxury, held the most important government jobs, and paid very little in taxes.

The Third Estate (professional and businesspeople, farmers, and laborers) made up 97 percent of the French population. This group paid more than their share of the taxes and did the work that made it possible for the nobles and high church officials to live well. The *bourgeoisie* (middle class) was the most influential group in the Third Estate. They suffered from tariffs on trade, restrictions on manufacturing, and restrictions on business activity. Many wanted the government to leave business alone. Such a policy, called *laissez-faire* (hands off), had been presented by Scottish economist Adam Smith in his book *Wealth of Nations*. From the ranks of the bourgeoisie came the intellectuals (highly educated philosophers and writers) who would begin and lead the French Revolution. These were the leaders of the 18th-century *Enlightenment* or *Age of Reason*. They believed that people had natural rights and should be governed with logic and reason.

The ideas of the French philosophers influenced many people. One of the best-known philosophers was Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778). In his book *The Social Contract*, he presented new theories of government: responsibility to the people and respect for natural rights. The ideas of Rousseau and Montesquieu influenced North American revolutionaries, such as Thomas Jefferson, and South American independence leaders, such as Simón Bolívar.

All three estates were represented in the lawmaking body of France, the Estates General. But this body rarely met. As a result, the majority of French people had no chance to influence the way they were ruled.

b. Insolvency. Another great problem of France in the late 1700's was a lack of money. The many wars ordered by Louis XIV against Great Britain and other nations had drained the treasury. France's support of the American revolutionary cause had also been costly. The nobles and clergy refused to pay higher taxes or to give up any of their privileges. As a result, the large and inefficient government was close to being bankrupt.

c. Injustice. A third serious problem was injustice. France did not have one set of courts and laws that applied to everyone. The king or his representative could imprison anyone for any reason for any period of time. Once in jail, a person might never be brought to trial, be allowed to apply for bail, or even be charged with a crime.



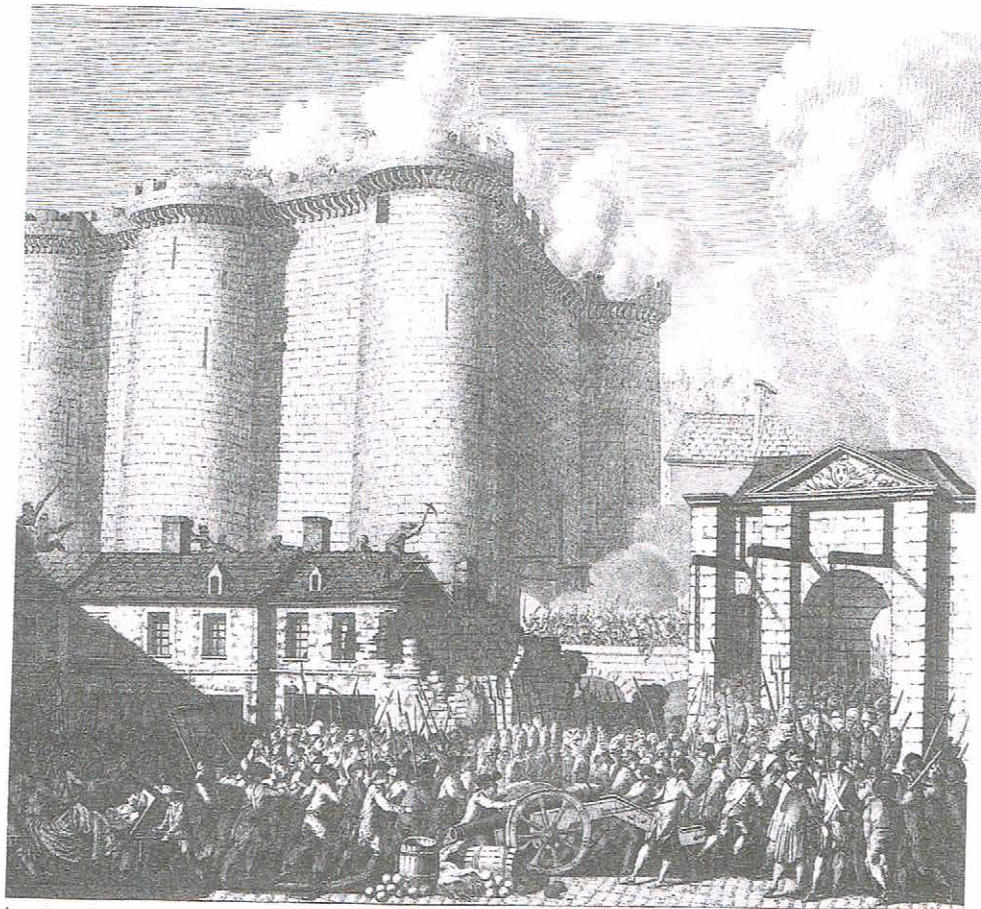
This 18th-century cartoon shows the Third Estate carrying the burden of the First and Second Estates.

2. The Beginning of the Revolution. When King Louis XVI (ruled 1774–1792) could not raise more money to finance the government, he called the Estates General into session. It met in 1789 for the first time in 175 years. Immediately, there was a problem about voting. Since each estate had only one vote, the First and Second Estates could outvote the Third Estate.

The Third Estate did not like this arrangement. Its members wanted each representative to have a vote. (The Third Estate had 600 representatives; the Second, 300; and the First, 300.) When the First and Second Estates disagreed, the Third Estate withdrew from the Estates General and formed the National Assembly. The representatives from the Third Estate took an oath to provide France with a constitution that would limit the power of the king and give more rights to the people.

Most French people enthusiastically supported the aims of the National Assembly. Threats by the king to arrest the leaders of the Assembly caused riots all over France. On July 14, 1789, an angry crowd stormed and captured a fortress called the Bastille in Paris. The Bastille had been used as a prison for opponents of the government. The crowd then marched on city hall, killed the mayor of Paris, and set up a revolutionary government.

In the countryside, peasants rose up against nobles, burning manor houses on some feudal estates. When the people stopped



In storming the Bastille, Paris revolutionaries also attacked a symbol of the Old Regime.

paying taxes and royal officials fled France to keep from being killed, the government broke down. The king was forced to accept the revolutionary government led by the National Assembly.

The National Assembly changed France in many ways. In August 1789, it adopted the Declaration of the Rights of Man. The declaration provided all people of France with such basic rights as freedom of speech, religion, and the press. It also guaranteed the right of men to participate in the government of France. The National Assembly reformed the legal system. It provided for elected judges, trial by jury, and an end to brutal punishments.

Perhaps the Assembly's most important work was the Constitution of 1791. It reformed the government by establishing a limited monarchy. After Louis XVI accepted the new constitution, the National Assembly was dissolved. A Legislative Assembly was elected to make laws for France.

3. The Republic. In 1792, the new legislators faced threats from outside France. Prussia and Austria went to war with France to

aid the royal family. Later, Britain, Spain, and Holland joined the fight against France.

A powerful extremist group called the Jacobins convinced people that the king had plotted with Austria and Prussia to overthrow the revolutionaries and restore the absolute monarchy. The Assembly was forced to arrest the king and queen. Then the Assembly called for new elections to choose representatives for a National Convention. The Convention drew up a new constitution and created the First French Republic.

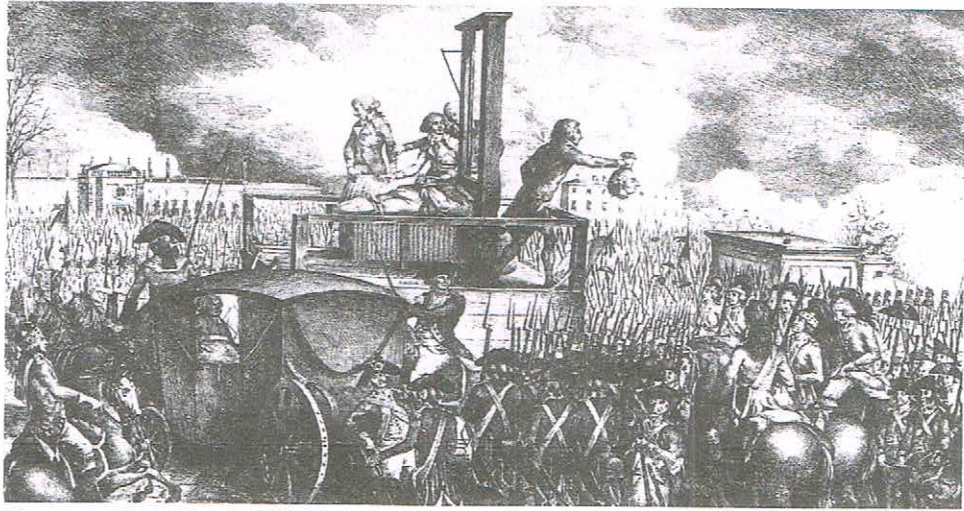
a. *Reign of Terror.* The Convention also put Louis XVI on trial for treason. He was found guilty and in January 1793 beheaded. Soon a Committee of Public Safety, led by the Jacobins, directed the government. The leader of the Committee was Maximilien Robespierre. In mid-1793, the Committee began a Reign of Terror. It arrested anyone suspected of opposing the Committee, sympathizing with the monarchy, or aiding the enemies of France. Most of the people who were arrested were killed. Thousands were beheaded by a machine called the *guillotine*. Others were drowned or shot.

In early 1794, the Jacobin leaders turned on one another. Finally, in July 1794, a moderate group in the National Convention had Robespierre beheaded, thus ending the Reign of Terror.

Although the Jacobins created a dictatorship and fostered great fear among people, they did stimulate French patriotism. The majority of people at last felt that the privileges of the aristocracy had ended. They were inspired by the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Pride was stirred by a song called "The Marseillaise," which became the French national anthem. Most French people stood together to save France from its enemies. By 1795, French armies had not only defended the nation but had conquered parts of Holland, Belgium, and Germany.

b. *The Directory.* In 1795, another constitution placed France under the control of the Directory, a five-member committee. The Directory proved to be corrupt and inefficient. It could not solve the country's serious financial problems. Furthermore, in 1798, the enemies of France gained new strength. Britain, in control of the seas, persuaded other countries to join the fight against France. In the following year, French armies lost land battles in Italy, Switzerland, and Holland. France's future looked dark.

In 1799, an able young general named Napoleon Bonaparte forced the Directory to resign. He then took over the government and brought the French Revolution to an end.



The execution of Louis XVI. The Reign of Terror soon followed.

4. The Napoleonic Era. Napoleon has always been regarded as a son of the Revolution. His climb from poverty in Corsica, an island south of France, to become the ruler of France was made possible by the Revolution. After 1789, France often looked to men of talent and energy rather than to men of noble birth to be leaders. The qualities that helped Napoleon become France's youngest and most popular general also made possible his rise to become the country's first emperor in 1804. Under his rule, France became a military dictatorship and the most powerful nation in Europe.

a. Napoleonic reforms. Between 1802 and 1805, Napoleon increased the efficiency of the French government. He had a new law code prepared. The Code Napoléon made all citizens equal before the law. It provided for trial by jury and religious freedom. The Code Napoléon is still the basis of the French legal system. It has also served as a model for the legal systems of several countries in Europe and Latin America.

Napoleon organized a public school system run by a committee called the University of France. He established the Legion of Honor, an honorary society for people who had performed important services for France.

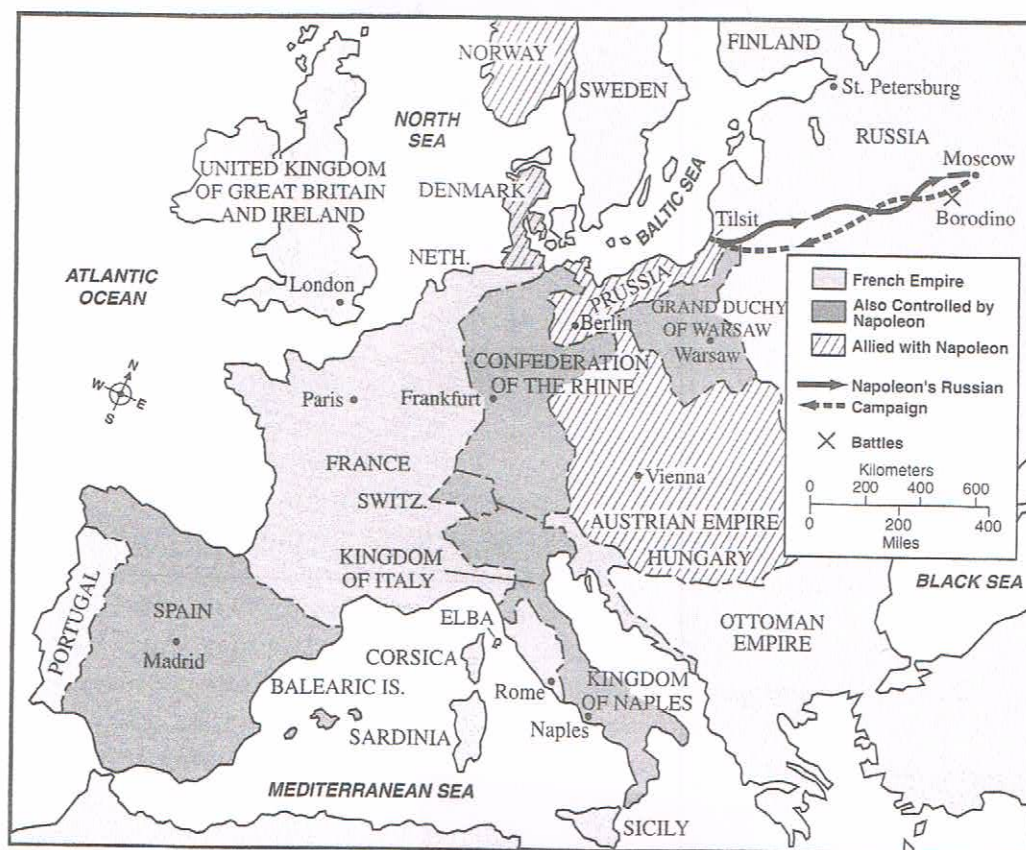
Napoleon gave France a fair taxation system and set up the Bank of France. This organization coined money and kept the currency stable. It also made sure that economic conditions favored business activity. As a result, France stayed reasonably prosperous.

All of these reforms made the people of France like Napoleon, even though he was a dictator. He gave France order, stability, and the kind of equality that the Revolution had called for. But

Napoleon did not permit freedom of the press. Nor did he give the French peace.

b. Foreign expansion. Shortly after Napoleon took control of the government, he defeated the Austrians and made peace with Britain. But in 1803, the treaty with Britain fell apart. Britain persuaded Austria, Russia, Sweden, and Naples to renew the fight

Napoleon's Empire, 1812



against France on land and sea. The resulting battles are known as the Napoleonic Wars. They lasted from 1805 to 1815. Napoleon showed his military genius by leading the armies of France to victories over Austria, Russia, and Prussia. He also invaded Portugal and Spain. Russia became an ally of France in 1807. Most of Italy came under Napoleon's control. So did the Netherlands. He abolished the Holy Roman Empire. In its place, he grouped most of the German states together in a Confederation of the Rhine.

By 1807, Napoleon controlled most of the countries on the continent of Europe. He had given France an empire. Only Britain, with its powerful navy, was able to continue fighting Napoleon.

To weaken Britain, Napoleon took steps to cut off its trade. Under the Continental System, European countries were ordered not to buy goods from or sell to Britain. Even ships from British colonies were stopped from trading with their home country. Many countries in Europe, including Russia, did not want to follow Napoleon's orders. The Portuguese refused. Their rebellion against French authority started the Peninsular War, which lasted from 1808 to 1813. By then, Spanish, Portuguese, and British troops had pushed Napoleon's forces back into France.

c. *French retreat.* Partly to punish Russia for not going along with the Continental System, Napoleon invaded that country in 1812. Some 600,000 troops started out on the march to Moscow in June. The French forces occupied Moscow in September. In October, the Russians counterattacked. The French retreated, and in November, winter set in. Only some 100,000 of the French forces survived.

The setback in Russia encouraged all parts of the empire in Europe to rebel against French military rule. In 1813, the armies of Prussia, Austria, and Russia decisively defeated Napoleon at Leipzig (in Germany) in the Battle of Nations. Early in 1814, even many French people turned against the emperor. Finally, in April, Napoleon was captured and exiled to Elba, an island in the Mediterranean.

In March 1815, Napoleon saw a chance to regain power. He escaped from Elba and marched through France. Loyal French soldiers joined his cause. Troops from all over Europe rushed to stop Napoleon. Led by the British Duke of Wellington, the allies defeated Napoleon in June 1815 at Waterloo in Belgium. Napoleon was then exiled to the island of St. Helena in the South Atlantic Ocean. He died there in 1821.

The Napoleonic Era was over. The long wars had caused great bloodshed and destruction throughout Europe. Yet

Napoleon's armies had also spread the revolutionary ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity. These ideals and the Code Napoléon inspired other Europeans to make changes in their governments.

5. The Congress of Vienna. After Napoleon's defeat in April 1814, the leaders of Europe decided to hold a conference to determine how to keep the peace. They met in Vienna, Austria, beginning in September 1814. Representatives came from most countries in Europe. Even France was allowed to send a delegate. Most decisions were made by officials from Great Britain, Russia, Prussia, and Austria.

Prince Klemens von Metternich, a brilliant Austrian diplomat, dominated the conference. Metternich's ideas would greatly influence European affairs for 30 years.

The Congress of Vienna attempted to keep Europe at peace by establishing a *balance of power* among the nations. It wanted to prevent any one nation from becoming militarily stronger than its neighbors. The decision makers at the Congress also supported the principle of *legitimacy*. Wherever possible, the royal families who had ruled before the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Era were restored to power. A Bourbon king, Louis XVIII, had already been placed on the throne of France. Former ruling families were returned to power in Austria, Prussia, Spain, and the many states of Italy.

The Congress opposed the efforts of the Poles, Belgians, and other national groups to govern themselves. Any demand for limiting royal power or granting political rights to the common people was rejected. Such ideas were considered to be revolutionary and dangerous.

The decision makers at Vienna did not force France to sign a harsh peace treaty. They wanted the French people to accept the

government of Louis XVIII. France lost all the territory it had taken in Europe. Its boundaries were to be the same as they had been in 1792. It kept most of its overseas possessions. But France was made to pay for damages it had done to other nations during the wars. It also had to pay to keep troops of the victorious nations in forts along the borders of France.

The Congress of Vienna ended the era of the French Revolution and Napoleon. Yet the revolutionary spirit did not die in 1815. Throughout the 19th century, demands for political change would lead to violence in France and elsewhere in Europe.