

SECOND EDITION

*A Short History  
of the  
French  
Revolution*



*Jeremy D. Popkin*

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# A Short History of the French Revolution



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# Preface



From the time it occurred down to our own day, the French Revolution has always been recognized as one of those occurrences that truly changed the world. When the French people in 1789 overthrew the monarchical system under which they had lived for centuries and replaced it with a written constitution that redefined their country's political system and social structure, they were trying to implement new ideas about government and society, ideas that have become the basis of life, not only in France, but in much of the rest of the modern world. The dramatic struggles of the French Revolution provoked debates that are still relevant today. They raised questions about the nature of liberty and equality, the extent of human rights, the legitimate powers of government, the definition of nationhood, the relations between the sexes, and the ability of human beings to control their own destiny. The Revolution and the succeeding Napoleonic era saw the most extensive wars Europe had ever known, and set the stage for the development of modern nation-states and ultimately for the wars and revolutions that have marked the history of the twentieth-century world.

Because of their importance, few historical events have been studied as closely as those that took place in France between 1789 and 1815. A vast literature seeks to explain the origins of the Revolution, the goals of its leaders, the role of ordinary men and women in its events, and to draw up the balance sheet of its successes and its failures. That literature continues to grow because historians continue to approach the Revolution with new

questions in mind. Nineteenth-century scholars weighed the revolutionaries' contributions to the ideals of constitutional government and Napoleon's impact on the art of warfare. As modern working-class movements grew at the beginning of the twentieth century, historians uncovered the importance of popular participation in the Revolution. The rise of Communist and fascist totalitarianism directed attention to the workings of the Jacobin dictatorship and the Napoleonic regime. Current interests in the role of women in the past and in the cultural dimension of history have directed attention to areas often ignored in earlier studies.

This short account attempts to introduce students to the major events that make up the story of the French Revolution, and to the different ways in which historians have interpreted them. It makes no claim to be comprehensive: no single volume can hope to encompass all aspects of the revolutionary drama. It will have served its purpose if it succeeds in helping instructors to share the excitement of studying this unique period of the past with their classes, and if it encourages students to undertake further exploration of the subject.

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## Chapter 1



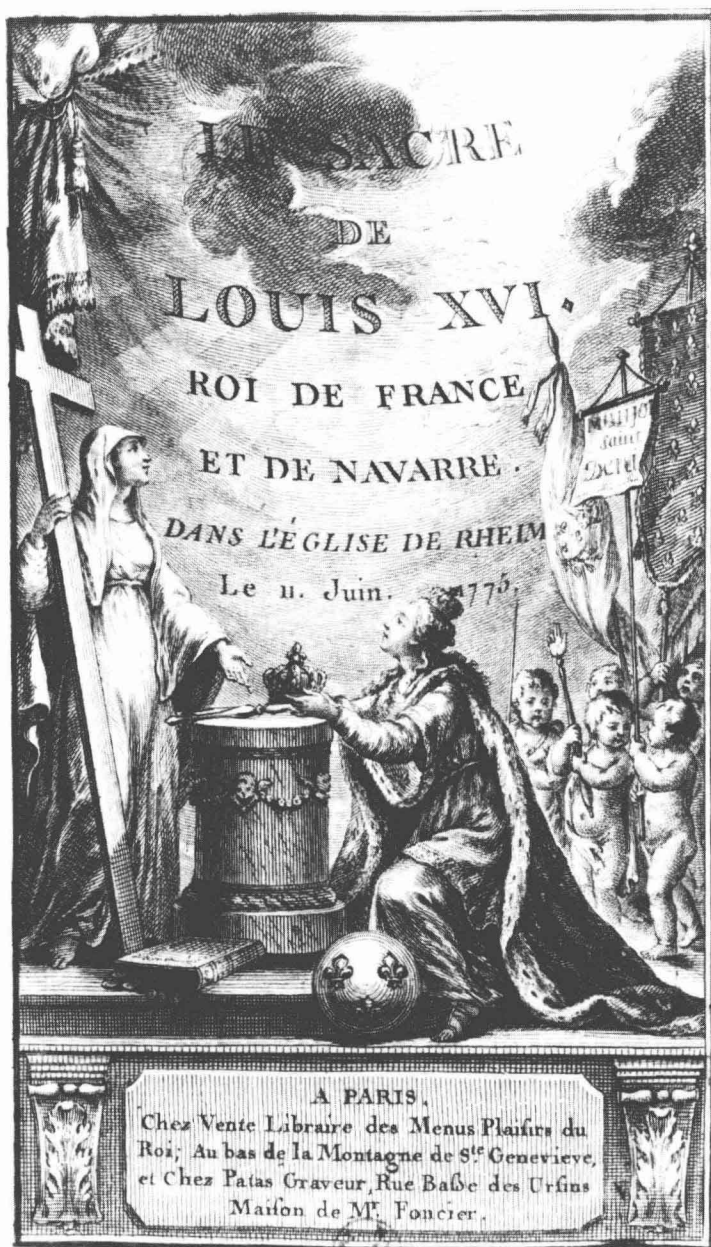
# The Origins of the French Revolution

Late on the night of 14 July 1789, Louis XVI, king of France, met with the duke of La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, one of his courtiers, to discuss the dramatic news he had just received. In the capital city of Paris, 15 miles from his royal palace of Versailles, the population had risen up and stormed the royal fortress of the Bastille. "Is it a revolt?" the bewildered king supposedly asked, thinking that the event was no more than a meaningless outbreak of violence that could quickly be brought under control. "No, Sire, it is a revolution," the duke is said to have replied.

For more than two centuries, historians all over the world have agreed with the duke's assessment. The events of 14 July 1789 marked the overthrow of a centuries-old system of government and society, and the beginning of a new era for France and the entire western world. The storming of the Bastille caught Louis XVI by surprise. With the advantage of hindsight, however, we can see that there were many tensions in France's institutions, its social order, and its culture that made a revolution, if not inevitable, at least conceivable. Understanding the origins of the French Revolution thus requires some familiarity with the major features of eighteenth-century France.

### THE PROBLEMS OF THE MONARCHY

After the French Revolution started, supporters frequently offered a very simple political explanation of their movement. They were revolting, they



### Coronation of Louis XVI

Traditional symbols dominate this illustration of Louis XVI's coronation in 1775. The king takes his crown from a saint holding the cross, indicating the divine origins of his powers, while angels behind him carry banners and emblems associated with the French monarchy since the Middle Ages. This engraving gives no hint of the challenges to the church and established institutions that were to lead to the French Revolution a few years later.

Source: Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

said, against a system of tyranny or despotism, in which all power was monopolized by a single man, the king, and by his arbitrarily chosen ministers. As an example of this excessive power, they were likely to cite the words of Louis XV, who told some recalcitrant magistrates in 1766 that according to French law, “the sovereign power resides in my person only.”<sup>1</sup> This was not merely rhetoric: critics of absolutism could also cite real examples of the king’s arbitrary and unrestrained power, such as his ability to issue *lettres de cachet*, arrest warrants that allowed the imprisonment of any subject without a trial.

With the benefit of hindsight, historians can easily recognize that this characterization of the old regime monarchy as a despotism is greatly exaggerated. Prerevolutionary France was indeed an absolute monarchy—that is, one in which all sovereign powers, including the right to make laws and to enforce them, the right to appoint judges, and the right to make war and to sign treaties, were supposedly exercised exclusively by the king. But, as French legal theorists had always taught, the king’s absolute powers were neither arbitrary nor tyrannical ones. The king was obligated to rule according to laws and customs that had accumulated over the ages. He could not, for example, alter the rules of hereditary succession, which dictated that the throne passed to a king’s closest living male relative. Indeed, in explaining the political difficulties that led to the Revolution of 1789, modern historians are more likely to stress the weaknesses of the absolutist system than its excessive concentration of power.

The weakness that did the most to precipitate the Revolution was the monarchy’s inability to balance its income and its expenses. Laws and customs required the French government to fulfill many responsibilities that required extensive expenditures; they also limited the king’s ability to raise money to pay for these obligations. Broadly speaking, the king of France was responsible for maintaining order within his kingdom and for defending it from enemies. The maintenance of internal order required keeping up police forces and guards scattered throughout territories that made up the largest kingdom in western Europe. External defense was even costlier. Like all European monarchs, the king of France governed a state in constant rivalry with its neighbors. Kings were educated from birth not only to defend the lands they inherited but also to seek opportunities to enlarge them, thereby acquiring the glory that was an essential element of kingship.

Through a long series of conquests and acquisitions, the kingdom of France had grown from a medieval principality centered around the capital city of Paris into the largest and most populous state in Europe. The kings of the Bourbon dynasty, the line from which Louis XVI, ruler at the time of the Revolution, descended, had all engaged in warfare to enlarge their realm. They had built up a kingdom that extended from the lowlands of Flanders in the north to the Pyrenees and the Mediterranean Sea in the south, from the Atlantic Ocean in the west to the Rhine river and the Alps in

the east, and that included colonies as far away as Canada, the Caribbean, and the Indian subcontinent. To do so, they had built up a costly military machine. Under Louis XIV, king from 1643 to 1715, the French army had grown to 400,000 men, the largest Europe had ever seen, and France had seemed poised to dominate the entire continent. His successors were less aggressive, but they nonetheless felt a responsibility to keep France strong and to protect its interests and its reputation abroad.

Some of the problems that led to the French Revolution grew out of the expenses incurred through France's efforts to maintain its position relative to the other European great powers. Located on the continent, France had often found itself at odds with its rivals to the east, Prussia and Austria. At the same time, France's coastlines on the Atlantic and the Mediterranean encouraged overseas ambitions that set the stage for repeated clashes with England. The country's poor performance in the eighteenth century's most extensive conflict, the Seven Years' War (1756–1763), suggested that the French monarchy was unable to cope with the challenges posed by these multiple rivalries. While stubborn noblemen intrigued against each other for control of France's armies on the continent, Prussian king Frederic the Great, a brilliant commander, inflicted humiliating defeats on the French troops. At the same time, the British used their control of the seas to capture French colonial possessions in India, Quebec, and the Caribbean. A decade later, France stood by helplessly as Prussia, Austria, and Russia annexed territories belonging to Poland, one of its traditional allies.

When Louis XVI came to the throne in 1774, he entrusted foreign affairs to the count of Vergennes, who was determined to restore the country's international prestige. When England's colonies in North America revolted in 1776, Vergennes took advantage of the situation. A small French army and the French fleet significantly aided the Americans, and France hosted the peace conference at which England conceded the colonies' independence in 1783. However, this success cost France a great deal of money and brought none of the tangible rewards in the form of new territories that usually went with a victory. Fear of adding even more debt was a major factor in keeping France from opposing Prussia's intervention in the Netherlands in 1787. On the eve of the crisis of 1789, the French monarchy seemed unable to maintain the country's international position.

In addition to maintaining his power and glory, the French king was expected to see to the welfare of his subjects. In earlier centuries, cities and the Catholic church had paid for many functions of local government, education, and care for the sick and the indigent, whose numbers seemed to grow relentlessly through the eighteenth century. As the monarchy had grown, however, it had taken an increasing role in many of these areas. In times of crop failure, royal intendants used royal money to provide relief supplies. The king maintained the country's main roads. His royal courts provided justice for his subjects. Through an ever-expanding system of

royal academies, the king subsidized writers, artists, scientists, doctors, and even veterinarians. And at Versailles, outside of Paris, Louis XIV, firm in the belief that a monarch needed to dazzle both his subjects and other sovereigns, had built a palace complex of a size and magnificence that Europe had not seen since Roman days. His successors continued to add to it and to underwrite the expenses of the courtiers who encircled the royal family. Although the court at Versailles actually accounted for only a small percentage of the monarchy's annual expenses, it was a visible symbol of lavish spending. But to curtail the flow of money to the army, to the administration of the kingdom, and to the court meant changing the very definition of what the monarchy was supposed to be.

To carry out all these responsibilities, the royal government had built up an extensive administrative network. Louis XIV, the most strong-willed and efficient of the Bourbon kings, had established a system of intendants, appointed royal officials stationed in each of the country's provinces and responsible for carrying out royal orders. Subordinate officials extended the intendants' reach to smaller towns and villages. France's system of administration was thus considerably more centralized than that of most other European states; in theory, royal laws could be applied evenly throughout the king's vast territories.

In practice, however, the administrative machinery ran into many obstacles. Each province, each region, each town had its own special laws and institutions, which the intendant could not ignore. By the eighteenth century France had become a legalistic society. From the humblest peasant to the most elegant noble, the king's subjects were imbued with the notion that they had rights and privileges they were entitled to defend. This legalistic outlook was reinforced by the conduct of the royal appeals courts, the thirteen *parlements*, whose judges claimed the right to review all royal laws and edicts to ensure that they were in conformity with the traditional laws of the realm.

Although the *parlements* were royal courts, the king's influence over the judges was limited because they literally owned their court seats. The sale of government posts was one of the ways in which the French monarchy made up for its inadequate sources of revenue: office owners did not have to be paid salaries. Jobs purchased this way became family property that could be passed down to heirs, regardless of their qualifications for the post, or sold off for a profit. These posts were desirable because offices conferred social prestige and, in many cases, granted their holders noble status. But this system of venal office-holding greatly reduced the efficiency of the royal administration. Venal office-holders, such as the judges of the *parlements*, could not be removed from their posts or forced to follow the instructions of the intendants.

The *parlements* in particular claimed that it was their duty to use this independence to resist actions that violated the traditional laws of the king-

dom and the rights of the king's subjects, including most efforts to raise taxes. In the absence of institutions of representative government, the parlements claimed to defend the interests of the "nation" against arbitrary authority. In practice, the parlements' resistance to reform often amounted to a defense of privileged groups' special interests, including those of the judges. But the parlements' denunciations of arbitrary rule and their insistence that the "nation" had a right to participate in political decision-making spread ideas about representative government among the population. Paradoxically, the privileged noble judges of these royal courts were fore-runners of a revolution that was to sweep away all special privileges.

### THE FAILURE OF REFORM

Throughout the second half of the eighteenth century, royal ministers recognized that the French government needed more revenue if it was going to maintain its international standing and meet its domestic obligations. But the problem of raising taxes illustrated better than anything else the institutional problems facing the monarchy. In theory, the king should not have had much trouble raising more money. Unlike the king of England, France's ruler had no need to negotiate with a representative body or parliament before he collected and spent money. The size of the kingdom and its rulers' need for a large army to defend it from foes who, unlike those of England, could easily threaten its borders had limited the role of the assembly of the Estates-General—France's equivalent to the English Parliament—and finally enabled kings to stop convening it altogether after 1614. They had established their right to collect traditional taxes without going through any legislative process. But this authority came at a price: unlike the king of England, the French ruler lacked any regular mechanism for negotiating an increase in taxes as the government's needs grew. He could only collect those taxes that had become customary over the years, and many subjects were able to evade payments because of equally customary exemptions. When new taxes were imposed, they often weighed most heavily on the poorest subjects because they had the least chance of protesting effectively.

To overcome this handicap, successive French rulers and finance ministers had adopted a wide range of expedients, including the sale of government offices. Just as it had created the system of venal offices to raise money and ended up confronting a powerful obstacle to carrying out its own policies, so the monarchy had made arrangements about tax collection that ended up limiting its own revenues. Rather than employing tax collectors who worked directly for the king, the government leased out the collection of most taxes to wealthy entrepreneurs, called tax farmers, who paid the treasury a set fee in exchange for the right to collect taxes in a given region. This system provided the monarchy with a dependable flow of



income, but it gave the tax farmers the incentive to squeeze as much as they could from the population, while forwarding as little as possible to Versailles. The hundreds of different tax-collection enterprises made rational control of the royal income impossible, and royal revenue could not be increased enough to meet the growing needs that emerged in the eighteenth century.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, royal ministers had come to realize that piecemeal measures were inadequate and had begun to propose sweeping reforms of the fiscal system. The last four decades of the monarchy witnessed repeated efforts to increase taxes and to make the French economy more productive, so that the government could extract more money from its subjects. As early as 1749, Louis XV's controller-general (the title given to prerevolutionary ministers of finance) Machault d'Arnouville had tried unsuccessfully to impose a uniform tax on all landed property in the kingdom. In the 1760s, the government adopted the program of a group of enlightened economic reformers, the Physiocrats, and tried to abolish traditional restrictions on the grain trade, hoping to encourage production and thereby expand its tax base. These plans broke down when bad harvests produced shortages and made the export of grain from the kingdom politically impossible. In 1770, the ministers Maupeou and Terray tried to write off much of the royal debt and to remove the obstructionist judges of the parlements in order to prevent the courts from hampering them.

The death of Louis XV in 1774 frustrated the Maupeou-Terray reform plans, but in 1776, one of Louis XVI's ministers, Turgot, tried to revamp the organization of France's economy along free-market lines even more extensively than his predecessors in the 1760s. In accordance with Physiocratic principles, he not only lifted restrictions on the grain trade but also tried to abolish the urban guilds, whose regulations restricted competition and governed the production of many manufactured goods. Popular protests and opposition from the parlements defeated him, but they did not stop government reform efforts. His successor, Necker, retreated from sweeping economic reforms. Necker hoped to save money, however, by eliminating unnecessary offices and collecting taxes more efficiently.

The fact that royal ministers had undertaken so many efforts to reform the government's financial system and increase tax revenues shows that they were well aware of the problems undermining the French monarchy. The result of their efforts demonstrated the justice of the great nineteenth-century French historian Alexis de Tocqueville's comment that "the most perilous moment for a bad government is one when it seeks to mend its ways."<sup>2</sup> To justify their reform proposals, the royal ministers themselves had been forced to criticize many long-established customs and institutions; they had thereby undermined the legitimacy of the existing order. At the same time, each of these prerevolutionary reform efforts implied fundamental changes in the structures of French society and threatened the priv-