

# FRENCH REVOLUTION

## 1 Enlightenment, liberty and revolution.

The main aim of this course is to provide you with basic historical background on the French Revolution, which marked a watershed in the history and culture of the period 1780–1830. The documents and illustrations associated with it are there to illustrate and bring out the points made. The first exercise is preceded by an extended preamble designed to facilitate your reading and understanding of the first document. This should in turn point a way towards engaging with other documents and illustrations associated with the course.

The French Revolution, or at least its impact on France and Europe, lies at the heart of the cultural shift from Enlightenment to Romanticism. It not only marked a decisive break in the history of France and Europe, but also accelerated intellectual, cultural and psychological change. It opened up new horizons and possibilities. Indeed, while there remain much controversy and scepticism as to the real extent of underlying change in the social and economic structure of France, scholars generally agree that the Revolution brought a widening of expectations and imaginative awareness: a belief, inherited from the Enlightenment, in the possibility of progress, as well as a conviction that state and society could be reconstituted with a view to realising social and individual aspirations and human happiness generally. As it degenerated into violence and bloodshed, however, the Revolution also provoked scepticism and pessimism about progress and human nature. The two basic types of modern political outlook, progressive and conservative, date from this experience. Which, if any, of these sets of beliefs was true is not at issue here. What matters is that the Revolution gave rise to them and gave them lasting life.

It is not possible in one course to do justice to the complexity of the French Revolution, whose significance preoccupied contemporaries and has continued to engage historians ever since. Suffice it to say that it was, and was considered by those who lived through it to be, the most momentous turning-point in modern history thus far, 'a traumatic convulsion' (Doyle, 2001, p. 2) that made its impact on the way people lived and thought across Europe throughout most of this period. The revolutionaries themselves recognised the break with the past by naming the social and political order before 1789 the 'Old Regime' (*ancien régime*).

The Revolution aroused the deepest passions, from ardent enthusiasm to inveterate hostility. Some of its enemies attributed it to a conspiracy hatched by freemasons or even by leading figures of the Enlightenment. Catherine the Great of Russia, once the darling of two of those leading figures, Voltaire and Diderot, was by 1794 voicing the suspicion 'that the aim of the philosophes was to overturn all thrones, and that the *Encyclopédie* was written with no other end in view than to destroy all kings and all religions' (Lentin, 1985, p. 269). This was a wild exaggeration, but it illustrates the shock caused by the Revolution, and it raises the important question how far the Revolution was a result of the Enlightenment. Others stress the role of chance and personality in the Revolution (for example, the weakness or folly of the French king and queen, the fanaticism of the Jacobins) and the pressure of events and forces (mass violence, civil war, invasion) which took on a momentum of their own, often overwhelming and sometimes destroying the revolutionaries themselves. This course condenses a sequence of tumultuous happenings in France and Europe in the decade 1789–99 (and a bewildering succession of political constitutions and legislative acts), in order to focus on the Revolution's more important stages or turning-points and their significance.

The main target of the Revolution was the political and social privilege entrenched under the Old Regime. Power in Europe rested, as it had for centuries, with a privileged nobility. Social status and political influence depended on birth, hereditary title to land or office (which could also be purchased), and unearned income derived from land and the right to peasants' contributions in cash, kind or labour. In France, in the generation before the Revolution, almost every one of the king's ministers, provincial governors and bishops was a nobleman. The watchword 'liberty' sums up the main slogan and aspiration of the Revolution: liberation from political despotism, social exclusion and discrimination. The second watchword, closely related to liberty, was 'equality'. Both 'liberty' and 'equality' were supposed to be inspired by and suffused with a third – 'fraternity' or brotherly love. The historian Francois Furet insists that the appeal of liberty, equality and fraternity, which proved so infectious, stemmed from what he calls the Revolution's 'deepest motivating force: hatred of the aristocracy' (Furet, 1996, p. 51).

Be that as it may, on the eve of the Revolution, 'in all countries the distinction between the noble or gentleman and the rest of the population was the cardinal fact of social life' (Hampson, 1969, p. 55).

## 2 Death of the Old Regime.

## 2.1 The bankrupt monarchy.

The immediate cause of the Revolution was that the French monarchy faced imminent bankruptcy. (This was partly because of the enormous sums it had spent assisting the American Revolution between 1778 and 1781 in order to discomfort the traditional enemy, Britain.) Neither nobility nor clergy paid direct tax. Without the consent of the established orders of society to a reorganization of the tax burden so as to restore its finances, the government could no longer function. Successive ministers tried to win over influential sections of the nobility to various reform proposals, with inconclusive results. In 1788 the helpless King Louis XVI was advised to turn for help to the nation as a whole in the shape of its representatives duly elected and convened in ancient form: the Estates-General.

On 5 May 1789, this body was therefore assembled at Versailles for the first time since 1614. It consisted of elected representatives of the three orders or estates of the realm: clergy, nobility and the Third Estate, or commoners, the remaining 95 per cent of the population. The representatives of the Third Estate were mainly officials, lawyers, landowners and merchants. If the precedent of 1614 was followed, each of the orders would assemble separately, and if the clergy and nobility voted as estates, they could outvote the Third Estate by two to one. In 1789, however, 'nobody knew what the Estates-General would do ... There was a complete vacuum of power. The French Revolution was the process by which this vacuum was filled' (Doyle, 2001, p. 36).

## 2.2 The Third Estate as the voice of the nation

Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès (1748–1836) trained as a priest and became assistant to a bishop. He had no religious vocation, however, and his fame arose as the author of a highly influential pamphlet, *What is the Third Estate?*, published in January 1789, on the strength of which Sieyès was elected a deputy to the Estates-General. Four editions or 30,000 copies of the book came out within months of its appearance, at a time of heightened consciousness that great changes were afoot. What is Sieyès's argument, how does he present it, and what is the significance of his book?

### 2.2.1 Sample analysis and discussion of 'What is the Third Estate?'

Let us take a closer look at part of this document before attempting the exercise below. This preamble should help you to relate to similar exercises in this course. The document is quite long, by far the longest one associated with this course; but you should not find it difficult to read it through fairly quickly and to extract its main points, to grasp Sieyès's 'message', and to note how he conveyed it. After you have read it through once, re-read it from the beginning up to 'a nation within a nation'.

#### ***Abbé Sieyès, What is the Third Estate?, 1789***

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

- 1. What is the Third Estate? – Everything.*
- 2. What has it been so far in the political order? – Nothing.*
- 3. What does it ask to be? – Something.*

*We shall see if these are the right answers. Meanwhile, it would be wrong to say that these truths have been exaggerated when you have not yet seen the supporting evidence. Next we shall examine the measures that have been tried, and those that must [still] be taken, for the Third Estate to actually become something. Thus we shall state:*

***4. What ministers have tried to do in the interests of the Third Estate, and what the privileged themselves propose to do for it;***

***5. What should have been done;***

***6. And finally, what remains to be done for the Third Estate so that it can take up the place that is its due [. . .]***

*What is a nation? A body of people who join together to live under common laws and be represented by the same legislative assembly. It is only too clear, isn't it, that the nobility has privileges and exemptions it dares to call its rights that are separate from the rights of the main body of citizens. As a consequence of these special rights, it does not belong to the common order, [nor is it subject to] the common law. Thus its private rights already make the nobility into a separate people, a nation within a nation. [. . .]*

*With regard to its political rights, these also it exercises separately. It has its own representatives without any mandate from the people. Its corps of deputies sits separately, and even if it should sit in the same chamber as the deputies of ordinary citizens, its representative function would still be fundamentally distinct and separate. The nobility is alien to the nation, firstly from the standpoint of principle, since it does not derive its powers from the people; secondly from the standpoint of its objectives since these involve defending, not the general interest, but the private one.*

*The Third Estate thus contains everything proper to the nation; and those who do not belong to the Third Estate cannot be seen as part of the nation. What is the Third Estate? Everything. [What is the third estate? 1: 'The Third Estate is the complete nation']*

*We shall examine neither the servitude in which the people have suffered for so long, nor the restrictions and humiliations which still constrain it. Its civil status has changed; it must change still more. It is absolutely impossible for the nation as a whole, or even for any separate order, to be free, if the Third Estate is not. We do not get our freedom from privileges, but from our rights as citizens, rights which belong to everyone.*

*If the aristocrats seek to keep the people in a state of oppression at the expense of that very freedom of which they have proved themselves to be unworthy, the people may well ask on what grounds. If the answer is 'by right of conquest', you will agree that this means going back in time a bit.*

*Sometimes, people seem surprised to hear complaints about the triple aristocracy of Church, Army and Law. They like to think that this is just a manner of speaking; but the phrase must be taken literally. If the Estates-General is the interpreter of the general will, and has legislative power in that capacity, then surely it is precisely this that makes the Estates-General, in as much as it is just a clerical-noble-judicial assembly, into a true aristocracy.*

*Add to this awful truth the fact that, in one way or another, every branch of the executive has fallen into the hands of the caste that supplies the Church, the Law and the Army with their members. Feelings of brotherhood or comradeship of some sort make nobles always prefer each other to the rest of the nation. The usurpation is total; they reign over us in every sense.*

*Read your history to check whether or not this statement fits the facts, and you will see, as I have seen, that it is a great mistake to think that France is governed as a monarchy. In the annals of our history, if you make an exception for a few years during the reign of Louis XI,<sup>1</sup> and of Richelieu,<sup>2</sup> and a few moments during Louis XIV's reign,<sup>3</sup> when it was a matter of despotism pure and simple, you will think you are reading the history of a palace autocracy. It is the court that reigns, not the monarch. The court has made and the court has unmade, has appointed ministers*

*and dismissed them, has created posts and filled them, and so on. And what is the court but the head of this vast aristocracy overrunning the whole of France, which through its members seizes on everything and exercises total control over every essential aspect of public life. So in their muted complaints, the people has become used to distinguishing the monarch from those who exercise power. It has always looked upon the King as a man so thoroughly deceived and so defenceless in the midst of an active, all-powerful court that it has never thought of blaming him for all the evil that is done in his name. Finally, is it not enough to open people's eyes to what is happening around us at this very moment? What do you see? The aristocracy, isolated, fighting simultaneously against reason, justice, the people, the minister and the King. The outcome of this terrible struggle is still unclear; and to think that people say the aristocracy is just an illusion!*

*To sum up, so far the Third Estate has not had any true representatives in the Estates-General. Thus its political rights have been non-existent. [What is the third estate? 2: 'What has the Third Estate been until now? Nothing']*

- 1 Louis XI, reigned 1461–83.
- 2 Richelieu governed France 1624–42.
- 3 Louis XIV's reign 1643–1715.

*The demands of the Third Estate must not be judged from the isolated observations of certain writers with some inklings of the rights of man. The Third Estate is still very backward in this respect, not only, I would say, by comparison with the enlightened views of students of the social order, but also with that mass of common ideas that forms public opinion. You can only make a judgment on the authentic petitions of the Third Estate through the formal demands which the great municipalities of the kingdom have addressed to the government. What do we see in these demands? That the people want to be something – to be honest, the least thing possible. First, it wants to have genuine representatives in the Estates-General, that is to say deputies drawn from its own order, able to*

*interpret its wishes and defend its interests. But what would be the use of [the Third Estate] participating in the Estates-General if interests hostile to its own were to predominate?*

*All it would do is sanction by its presence*

*an oppression of which it would be the eternal victim. So it certainly cannot go and cast its vote in the Estates-General unless it exerted an influence at least equal to that of the privileged orders. Secondly, it demands that the number of its representatives be equal to that of the two other orders put together. However, this equality of representation would become a complete illusion if each chamber had its own separate vote. The Third Estate demands thirdly therefore that votes be counted by heads and not by orders. This is what these demands that*

have apparently set off alarm bells among the privileged orders boil down to. They thought that for this reason alone the reform of abuses was becoming indispensable.

The modest objective of the Third Estate is to have an influence in the Estates-General equal to that of the privileged orders. I repeat, could it ask for less? And is it not clear that if its influence is less than equal, it has no hope of emerging from its state of political non-existence, and of becoming something? [. . .]

## **Second demand of the third estate**

***That the number of its deputies be equal to that of the two privileged orders.***

*Political rights, like civil rights, must derive from the status of being a citizen. This legal property is the same for everyone regardless of the amount of real property making up the wealth or income enjoyed by each individual. Any citizen fulfilling the conditions prescribed for becoming an elector has the right to be represented, and his representation cannot be a fraction of someone else's representation. This right is indivisible; everyone exercises it equally, just as everyone has equal protection under the law that they have agreed to make. How can you argue on the one hand that the law is the expression of the general will, that is to say of the plurality, and claim on the other that ten individual wills can cancel out a thousand other individual wills? Do we not then run the risk of having the law made by a minority? This is obviously contrary to the nature of things.*

*If these principles, certain as they are, seem to be derived too much from common ideas, I bring the reader back to a comparison right in front of his nose. Is it not true that everyone finds it fair for the huge bailiwick of Poitou to have more representatives in the Estates-General than the tiny bailiwick of Gex? Why is that? Because, they say, the population and tax revenue of Poitou are much higher than that of Gex. Thus principles are being accepted which permit you to determine the ratio of representatives. Do you want taxation to be the basis? Although we do not know precisely what the respective tax contribution of the different orders is, the Third Estate obviously bears more than half of the burden [. . .]*

*As far as population is concerned, the vast [numerical] superiority of the third order over the first two is well known. Like everybody else, I do not know what the real proportion is, but like anybody else I can do my sums [. . .] In total, there are less than two hundred thousand privileged persons in the first two orders. Compare that figure with a twenty-five to twenty-six million total population, and draw your own conclusions.*

*To get the same answer on the basis of different, but equally incontrovertible, principles, let us take the view that the privileged orders are to the great mass of citizens what exceptions are to the law. Every society must be regulated by common laws and be subject to a common order. If you make exceptions to that, they ought at the very least to be rare ones, and there can never be any question of the exception having the same weight and influence in public life as the norm. It is really insane to treat the interests of these exceptions as somehow balancing out those of the great mass of the people [. . .] In a few years time, when people come to look back on all the obstacles blocking this all too modest demand of the Third Estate, they will be surprised at the lack of substance in the arguments used against it, and even more surprised by the brazen effrontery of those who were bold enough to dig those excuses up.*

*The very people who invoke the authority of facts against the Third Estate could read in those facts a rule for their own conduct, if they were honest with themselves. The existence of a few loyal cities was enough to form a Chamber of Commons in the Estates-General under Philip the Fair. (Philip the Fair, reigned 1285–1314).*

*Since then, feudal servitude has disappeared, and rural areas have presented us with a large population of new citizens. Towns have multiplied and grown. Commerce and the arts have created, as it were, a multitude of new classes with large numbers of prosperous families full of well educated, public-spirited men. Why has this dual growth, so much greater than that of those loyal cities of earlier times, not encouraged this same authority to create two new chambers in favour of the Third Estate? Justice and sound politics alike require it. [. . .]*

*But I am using reason against people who can listen only to the voice of their own self-interest. Let us give them something to think about that might touch them more closely. Is it appropriate for today's nobility to hang on to the language and attitudes of the gothic age? Is it appropriate for the Third Estate, at the end of the eighteenth century, to stagnate in the sad, cowardly habits of the old servitude? If the Third Estate recognised and respected itself, then others would surely respect it too!*

*People should note that the old relationship between the orders has been changed simultaneously on both sides. The Third Estate, which had been reduced to nothing, has regained, through its industry, part of what had been stolen from it by the offence [committed] against it by those who were stronger. Instead of demanding its rights back, it has consented to pay for them; they have not been restored to the Third Estate but sold back to it; and it has acquiesced in their purchase. But in the end, in one way or another, it can take possession of them. It must not forget that today it constitutes a reality in the nation, whereas before it was a shadow, [and] that, in the course of this long process of change, the nobility has ceased to be the monstrous feudal power that could oppress with*

*impunity. It is the nobility that is now no more than the shadow of what it was, and this shadow is still trying to terrify a whole nation, but in vain – unless this nation wants to be regarded as the vilest on earth.*

### **Third and final demand of the third estate**

***That the Estates-General should vote, not by orders, but by heads.***

*The privileged orders fear the third order having equality of influence, and so they declare it to be unconstitutional. This behaviour is all the more remarkable for the fact that until now they have been two against one without finding anything unconstitutional in that unjust advantage. They feel very deeply the need to retain the veto over anything that could be against their interest.*

Source: D. Williams (ed.), *The Enlightenment*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 494–5, 498–9, 504–6.

#### **Continued.... 2.2.1 Sample analysis and discussion of ‘What is the Third Estate?’**

The fact of its immediate success and large print run already suggests that *What is the Third Estate?* was crisply written, had a clear and timely message, and was readily and immediately understood and appreciated. Sieyès is methodical, concise and to the point. He tells us straightaway that ‘we have three questions to ask ourselves’ about the Third Estate. He sets out those three questions in numerical order. To each question he gives a one-word answer. He then states, ‘We shall see if these are the right answers’, and undertakes to provide ‘the supporting evidence’.

This down-to-earth, systematic approach is very much in the style and spirit of the *Encyclopédie* in its clarity of presentation, its promise of logical argument based on supporting evidence, and its conclusions critical of existing institutions. Sieyès does not express his conclusions as views personal to himself but as demonstrable statements of objective fact (set out under points 4, 5 and 6).

In the next paragraph he asks, ‘What is a nation?’, and proceeds to give a definition. Again, his method and his objective are clear and logical. You will note, however, that this time he does not offer any supporting evidence for his statement. Why not? Presumably, he believed that his definition was self-evident and would be found so by his readers, as indeed it was.

Sieyès's basic idea of a nation was not new. It drew on Enlightenment concepts familiar to any educated reader. Diderot, in his article ‘Political authority’ published in the *Encyclopédie* in 1751, discussed terms and ideas which by 1789 had become the staple of political thought. He argued that sovereignty, or ultimate political power in a state, derives not from the monarch but from the ‘people’ or ‘nation’, that it must be exercised in their interest and for their benefit, that it should be controlled and circumscribed by laws, and that the ruler's tenure of office is in the nature of a trust exercised for the people's benefit and with their consent, underpinned by an implicit agreement or ‘social contract’ (Gendzier, 1967, pp. 185–8).

Against this familiar background, Sieyès takes a further easy and logical step by postulating another characteristic of a nation: namely, that it has an elected, representative legislative (law-making) assembly. This too follows implicitly from ideas popularized in the *Encyclopédie*, but it received a tremendous additional boost, first from the success of the American Revolution and the summoning of a constitutional convention by the United States in 1787, and now in France by the summoning of the Estates-General. The French people, or nation, were at last to be ‘represented’ in an assembly or, as it was soon to be called, a National Assembly, through which it too would be enabled to express its political will, frame its own laws and shape its own national destiny.

After this definition of a nation, uncontroversial in its Enlightenment borrowings but now suddenly fresh and revolutionary in its immediate relevance in 1789, Sieyès makes a further claim, all the more unexpected because of the equable tone and calm logic employed by him thus far. He suddenly claims that the nobility, by reason of its ‘privileges and exemptions’, is not part of the nation at all, but ‘a nation within a nation’. This, he states rhetorically, ‘is only too clear, isn't it’. The reader will take the implicit point (soon to be made explicit) that not only is this indeed the case, but that such a situation is illogical, unjust and wrong, no longer tenable or tolerable. Sieyès's purpose is to isolate and marginalise the nobility in his readers' eyes, and to expose it to their critical censure. In the circumstances of 1789, his message took on startling implications about the respective roles of the nobility and the Third Estate in the Estates-General.

Now go to p.72 of the document (from ‘To sum up ...’ to ‘... becoming something?’, p. 73). We see here a reference to another Enlightenment touchstone – ‘the rights of man’ – and also to the ‘petitions’ (*cahiers de doléances*) which the representatives at the Estates-General brought with them from their constituents. In invoking ‘the rights of man’, Sieyès again draws on a common background and strikes a common chord with his readers in his references to the political terminology of the Enlightenment. Again, too, in mentioning the petitions, there is the striking topicality of his comments as the Estates-General assembled to air the nation's grievances.

But Sieyès refers only fleetingly to the rights of man. His main point in this passage relates to something else, though closely related to it: 'equality'. Equality was another emotive catchword derived from the Enlightenment. In his article on 'Natural equality' in the *Encyclopédie* (1755), de Jaucourt states that 'natural equality' is based on 'the constitution of human nature common to all men ... Each person must value and treat other people as so many individuals who are naturally equal to himself' (Gendzier, 1967, p. 169). True, de Jaucourt then goes on to say that 'I know too well the necessity of different ranks, grades, honours, distinctions, prerogatives, subordinations that must prevail in all governments' (Gendzier, 1967, p. 170). De Jaucourt may be being ironic here, or he may be perfectly serious. Be that as it may, Sieyès is certainly serious in his complaint concerning the inequality of representation in the Estates-General of the Third Estate in relation to the other two estates (church and nobility). The Third Estate, he says, demands that the number of its representatives be equal to that of the two other orders put together' (emphasis added);.

### Exercise 1

**Now read from "With regard to its political rights" to "going back in time a bit." Briefly (in about 100 words) (i) explain in your own words what Sieyès has to say about the Third Estate and the nobility, and (ii) describe his tone.**

### Discussion

- Sieyès makes the revolutionary claim that the Third Estate itself constitutes the nation and should be adequately represented; that the nobility is over-privileged, exclusive, unrepresentative of the nation and over-represented in the Estates-General; and that the Estates-General should sit as a single integrated body, not divided into social orders and meeting in separate venues. Sieyès thus raises to the fore 'the quintessential revolutionary idea ... equality' (Furet, 1996, p.45).
- Sieyès's tone is confident, belligerent, uncompromising and inflammatory. His radical demands on behalf of the Third Estate largely take the form of blunt and open attacks on the nobility as a separate (and self-regarding) estate of the realm.

The significance of Sieyès's pamphlet lay in its 'consciousness-raising'. His defiant radicalism captured the mood of the 648 representatives of the Third Estate and inspired them to thumb their noses at the nobility or 'aristocrats', as he also calls them. (By 1789 and thanks partly to Sieyès, the word 'aristocrat' had become a term of abuse synonymous with undeserved privilege.)

On 17 June the deputies of the Third Estate unilaterally declared the assembly of their own members to be the true representative voice of the French nation: the 'National Assembly'. If the clergy and nobility wanted a voice in shaping the future of France, they must sit in the National Assembly as equals with the Third Estate. The pamphlet was both 'a treatise and a battle-cry' (Furet, 1996, p.48), a justification of and a summons to revolutionary action. On 20 June, finding itself locked out, the Third Estate, calling itself the National Assembly, withdrew to a nearby indoor tennis court and declared, in the so-called 'tennis-court oath', that it would not disperse until it had provided France with a new, written constitution. It deliberately and expressly excluded the nobility and clergy as such from the body politic. The National Assembly had seized power in the name of the French nation. The Revolution had begun.

### 2.3 Fall of the Bastille, 14 July 1789.

In a similar mood of aggrieved self-righteousness and revolutionary exultation came the fall of the Bastille, the medieval fortress and prison of Paris, on 14 July 1789. A catastrophic harvest in 1788 had provoked food riots in Paris and elsewhere. Louis XVI, alarmed both by this unrest and by the unexpected belligerence of the Third Estate, called troops into Paris to maintain order. It was feared that he also aimed to suppress the National Assembly, which rallied its supporters. The Parisian electors, those qualified to choose the city's representatives to the Estates-General, raised a militia of 48,000 men, the National Guard, to protect the Assembly. Its commander was the liberal-minded Marquis de Lafayette (1757–1834), who had fought as a volunteer with the American revolutionaries. The National Guard was short of arms. On 14 July, having ransacked the Invalides for muskets and cannons, it marched on the Bastille in search of gunpowder. When the governor, de Launay, appeared to offer resistance, it stormed the prison. De Launay and the chief city magistrate were lynched, their heads stuck on pikes and paraded about.

The event seemed to its supporters literally epoch-making. In fact, the Bastille in 1789 only contained eight prisoners (including lunatics and, until the week before its fall, the Marquis de Sade), but it had once briefly housed as state prisoners such leading figures of the Enlightenment as Voltaire and Diderot. Its fall was felt to symbolize the unstoppable might of the Revolution sweeping away the tyranny, oppression and injustice of the

past. An English eyewitness reported that the news 'produced an impression on the crowd really indescribable ... such an instantaneous and unanimous emotion of extreme gladness as I should suppose was never before experienced by human beings' (quoted in Hampson, 1975, p. 72). The British ambassador agreed: 'The greatest revolution that we know anything of has been effected with ... the loss of very few lives. From this moment we may consider France as a free country; the King a limited [that is, constitutional] monarch and the nobility as reduced to a level with the rest of the nation' (quoted in Townson, 1990, p. 34). To Charles James Fox, leader of the English party in opposition, the fall of the Bastille was 'the most glorious event, and the happiest for mankind, that has ever taken place since human affairs have been recorded' (quoted in Rudé, 1966, p. 181).

In France, the anniversary of the taking of the Bastille became an annual festival. Its significance as marking the passing of the Old Regime was commonly celebrated (as in the American War of Independence) by planting 'trees of liberty' as symbols of national regeneration. The king was constrained to accept the flag of the Revolution devised by Lafayette, the tricolour (red, white and blue), and to wear its colours on his cockade.

#### **Gustav III of Sweden on the fall of the Bastille, 1789**

##### **Letter from Gustav III to Count Stendingk, his ambassador at St Petersburg, 7 August 1789.**

Nothing is more terrible than the events at Paris between 12<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> July: the Invalides broken into; canon and armed force used against the Bastille; this fortress taken by storm; the governor, Monsieur de Launay, dragged by the mob to the Place de Grève and decapitated; his head carried in triumph around the town; the same treatment meted out to the chief magistrate; the formation of a civil militia of 48,000 men; the French and Swiss guards joined with the people; Monsieur de Lafayette

proclaimed commander-in-chief of the Paris militia; blue and red cockades raised,<sup>5</sup> the Estates declaring the King's ministers and the civil and military authorities to be responsible to the nation; and the King, alone with the Comte de Provence and the Comte d'Artois,<sup>6</sup> going on foot, without escort, to the Assembly, almost to apologise, and to request assistance to put down the disturbances: this is how weakness, uncertainty and an imprudent violence will overturn the throne of Louis XVI.

I am still so disturbed by this news that I am afraid my letter shows it.

*Source:* A. Lentin (ed.), *Enlightened Absolutism (1760–1790). A Documentary Sourcebook*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Averro Publications, 1985, p. 281.

*Blue and red were the colours of the city of Paris. The tricolour (red, white and blue) devised by Lafayette, replaced the white fleur-de-lys of the house of Bourbon as the flag of Revolutionary France on 17 July 1789. The king's brothers, later Louis XVIII (1814–24) and Charles X (1824–30).*

#### **Exercise 2**

Now read the second document (letter from Gustav III, absolute ruler of Sweden, August 1789. Gustav had just learned of the event from his ambassador in Paris. Briefly state what the letter tells us (i) about the storming of the Bastille and (ii) about Gustav's reaction to it as compared with that of the British ambassador just quoted.

#### **Discussion**

Factually, Gustav's letter provides an accurate account of the event. From his language, however, it is clear that, as he admits, he is a hostile commentator, deeply shocked at the breakdown of public order represented by the storming of the Bastille, the mob lynching of the governor, fraternization between the royal guards ('the French and Swiss guards') and 'the people', and the claims of the National Assembly ('the Estates'). He notes the role of popular violence and bloodshed, dismissed by the British ambassador as 'the loss of very few lives'.

Gustav is alarmed at the humiliation which all this represents for Louis XVI – a surrender of power by absolute monarchy. The French monarchy is on the way to becoming a constitutional monarchy, with ministers responsible to the Assembly. The British ambassador approves of the event as marking the advent of 'a free country'. Gustav abominates it, and laments Louis' appearance before the Assembly on 15 July not to give orders but 'to request assistance' and 'almost to apologise'. The letter confirms that the fall of the Bastille was seen by critics as well as enthusiasts as a significant (Gustav says 'terrible') blow to the Old Regime. Gustav fears for the king's throne.

#### **2.4 Enlightened reformism – dismantling the Old Regime.**

The National Assembly, the self-proclaimed and now de facto supreme representative and legislative organ of state, set to work on the constitution which it had sworn to introduce. Calling itself the Constituent Assembly (to stress both its representative credentials and its constitutional mission), it consisted of 745 deputies elected for two years with virtually unlimited power to pass laws. The king, by interposing his veto, might delay but could not override laws passed by it.

Between 1789 and 1791 the Assembly implemented a transformation of French institutions, marking a clear break with the Old Regime by its sweeping application of the principle of equality. In a series of revolutionary decrees between 4 and 11 August 1789, it removed at one fell swoop the social and administrative foundations of the Old Regime. The Assembly decreed the abolition of 'the feudal system in its entirety' and with it the removal of privilege in France: the abolition of church tithes (in addition to drawing revenues from its ownership of a tenth of the land, the Church drew a tithe equivalent to one-tenth of the yield of the remaining land) and all rents, taxes and services due from peasants to noble landowners (notably rents paid in kind and the *corvée*, or forced labour on road repairs); abolition of seigneurial law courts; abolition of the sale of offices and an end to the exemption from direct taxation enjoyed by church and nobility. It proclaimed the comprehensive principle of equality: social equality, equality before the law, equal liability to taxation, and equality of opportunity. 'All citizens,' it decreed, 'without distinction of birth, are eligible for all offices, whether ecclesiastical, civil or military' (Hardman, 1999, p. 113). The nobility thus lost its automatic monopoly of the higher offices of state.

## **2.5 Declaration of the Rights of Man**

On 26 August 1789, the Assembly passed the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen as the preamble to a constitution drawn up in 1791. (The Declaration also prefaced the later constitutions of 1793 and 1795.)

### **National Assembly, Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, 1789.**

**Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, decreed by the National Assembly in the sessions of 20th, 21st, 23rd, 24th and 26th August, 1789, accepted by the King.**

#### **Introduction.**

The representatives of the French people, constituted as a National Assembly, considering that ignorance, neglect or contempt for the rights of man are the sole causes of public misfortunes and the corruption of governments, have resolved to set forth in a solemn declaration the natural, inalienable and sacred rights of man, so that this declaration may serve as a constant reminder to all members of society of their rights and duties; so that the acts of the legislative power and of the executive power, being liable at any time to be compared with the purpose of all political institutions, may thereby be the more respected; so that the citizens' demands, henceforth founded on simple and incontrovertible principles, may always operate for the maintenance of the constitution and the good of all.

The National Assembly therefore recognises and declares, in the presence and under the auspices of the Supreme Being, the following rights of man and citizen:

1. Men are born and remain free and equal in respect of their rights; social distinctions can only be based on public utility.
2. The aim of every political association is the protection of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man; these rights are liberty, property, security and resistance to oppression.
3. The fundamental source of all sovereignty resides in the nation; no body of men, no individual can exercise an authority which does not expressly derive therefrom.
4. Liberty consists in being able to do whatever does not harm another. Thus, the exercise of each man's natural rights has no limits other than those which guarantee to the other members of society the enjoyment of these same rights; those limits can only be determined by the law.
5. The law can only forbid acts harmful to society. Whatever is not forbidden by the law cannot be prevented, and no-one can be forced to do what the law does not require.
6. The law is the expression of the general will; all citizens have the right to participate in lawmaking, personally or through their representatives; the law must be the same for all, whether it protects or punishes. All citizens being equal in its eyes, are equally eligible for all public honours, positions and duties, according to their ability, and without any distinction other than those of their virtues and talents.
7. No man may be charged, arrested or detained except under the circumstances laid down by the law and in accordance with the formalities prescribed therein. Those who solicit, promote, carry out or cause to be carried out any arbitrary orders, must be punished; but any citizen lawfully summonsed or arrested must instantly obey: he renders himself liable by resistance.
8. The penalties laid down by law should only be such as are strictly and manifestly necessary, and no-one may be punished except by virtue of an established law, promulgated before the commission of the offence, and lawfully applied.
9. Every man being presumed innocent until found guilty, if his arrest is considered essential, any harshness unnecessary to secure his arrest must be strictly forbidden by the law.



10. No man must be penalised for his opinions, even his religious opinions, provided that their expression does not disturb the public order established by the law.
11. The free expression of thoughts and opinions is one of the most precious of the rights of man; every citizen is therefore entitled to freedom of speech, of expression and of the press, save that he is liable for the abuse of this freedom in the circumstances laid down by the law.
12. The rights of man and of the citizen require a public force to guarantee them; this force is therefore established for the good of all, and not for the private benefit of those to whom it is entrusted.
13. A common tax is essential for the upkeep of the public force and for the costs of administration; it must be levied equally on the citizens in accordance with their capacity to pay.
14. The citizens are entitled, in person or through their representatives, to determine the need for public taxation, freely to consent to it, to control its use, and to fix the amount, basis, mode of collection and duration.
15. Society is entitled to require every public servant to give an account of his administration.
16. Any society which lacks a sure guarantee of rights or a fixed separation of powers, has no constitution.
17. Property being an inviolable and sacred right, no-one may be deprived of it save when this is clearly required by public necessity, lawfully determined, and only on condition of fair and prior compensation.

### **To the representatives of the French people.**

Source: Contemporary print of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen in the Musée Carnavalet, Paris. Reproduced in G. Duby, *Histoire de la France*, volume 2, Paris, Larousse, 1971, p. 306, trans. A. Lentin.

### **Exercise 3**

**Now read this document (above). How far do you see in it the influence of the Enlightenment? What was revolutionary about it?**

### **Discussion**

*The principles contained in the Declaration and described there as 'simple and incontrovertible' were familiar to the deputies from the Encyclopédie (and also from the American Revolution). They derived from the Enlightenment and were invoked in the petitions (cahiers de doléances), the lists of grievances which the delegates had drawn up for the meeting of the Estates-General. What made them revolutionary was that for the first time in European history they were formally incorporated and proclaimed in a document of state, which declared that the 'purpose of all political institutions' was to guarantee the citizens' 'natural rights' (civil rights or human rights, as we call them now). These rights were declared to be inalienable: that is, citizens could not divest themselves of them (for example, by selling them) or be deprived of them by subsequent legislation. They were to be entrenched in the constitution.*

**Article 1** reaffirmed the principle of equality: 'Men are born and remain free and equal in ... rights; social distinctions can only be based on public utility' (as opposed to noble birth or status). The rights of man included freedom from arbitrary arrest and imprisonment, freedom of opinion and speech, the right to a voice in the levying of taxes, the right to own property, equality before the law, and (as we have seen) equality of opportunity in access to government posts.

There was one crucial limitation: the rights of man did not apply to women. The (male) revolutionaries were largely hostile to the cause of women's suffrage, though women took part in some of the events of the Revolution and their cause was championed by such distinguished writers as Condorcet (1743–94), one of the younger philosophes of the Enlightenment. In 1793 women were to be expressly excluded from the rights of citizens. The feminist Olympe de Gouges, author of *The Declaration of the Rights of Woman and Citizen* (1791), was to fall victim to the Terror in 1793.

Also revolutionary in the European context was the assertion in the Declaration that sovereignty resided with the nation, not with the king (a claim made in the *Encyclopédie*, as we have seen, and vindicated in the American Revolution). In October 1789, absolute monarchy was formally abolished and replaced by constitutional monarchy. The Assembly decreed that Louis XVI was 'by the grace of God and the constitutional law of the State, King of the French' (emphasis added).

### **National Assembly, Decree on the Abolition of the Nobility, 19 June 1790.**

The National Assembly decrees that hereditary nobility is for all time abolished and that consequently no one whosoever shall use or be addressed by the titles of prince, duc, comte, marquis, vicomte, vidame, baron, chevalier, messire, écuyer, noble or any other similar title.

Every French citizen must use only the real surname of his family. He may no longer wear livery or cause it to be worn or possess armorial bearings. In church, incense will be burned only to honour the deity and will not be offered to anyone be he never so high.

No body or individual will be addressed by the titles monseigneur and meisseigneurs nor by those of excellence, altesse, éminence or grandeur. However, no citizen may choose to make the present decree a pretext for defacing monuments placed in churches, charters, titles and other documents of importance to families, property or the embellishments of any public or private building; nor may anyone at all proceed with or require the implementation of the provisions relating to liveries and to armorials on carriages before 14 July (for citizens resident in Paris) or before the expiry of three months (for those living in the provinces).

Source: J. Hardman (ed.), The French Revolution Sourcebook, London, Arnold, 1999, p. 113.

#### Exercise 4

Now read the decree on the abolition of nobility (above), June 1790 . Do you notice any similarity with What is the Third Estate? by Sieyès?

#### Discussion

*The decree implements precisely what Sieyès and his fellow deputies of the Third Estate demanded: the outright abolition of the nobility as a separate social order. Henceforth everyone is simply a 'French citizen' without distinction of titles or armorial insignia. In tone the decree echoes Sieyès's uncompromising egalitarian hostility towards noble privilege.*

#### 2.5.1 Imagery of the Declaration

The decree on the abolition of nobility drew the line at damage to property, ownership of property having been proclaimed a natural right in the Declaration of the Rights of Man. (The decree is evidence that, as is known from other sources, the crowd was taking the law into its own hands by ransacking chateaux, destroying records of seigneurial dues, etc.)

French School, Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, 1789, oil on canvas, Musée Carnavalet, Paris.

Fig.1



#### Exercise 5

Looking at Figure 1 above, what does the imagery of the Declaration of the Rights of Man appear to draw upon?

#### Discussion

*The basic form is biblical in inspiration: the well-known image of the two tablets of the law (the Ten Commandments) brought down by Moses from Mount Sinai. The implication is that the 17 rights of man parallel (or perhaps even supersede) the Judaeo-Christian decalogue. (In the preamble to the Declaration God is referred to as 'the Supreme Being', the divine creator of the universe postulated by Enlightenment deists.)*

Other imagery is classical, drawn from motifs common in ancient republican Rome:

- the central pike (the weapon of the free citizen), surmounted by the Phrygian cap, or legendary red cap of liberty, associated with the freed slave;
- enveloping the pike, the fasces (upright sticks, bound together in a bundle, carried before the 'lictors' or senior magistrates and symbolising solidarity and civic virtue);
- garlands of oak leaves, symbolising victory.

Other symbols include a chain with a broken fetter, symbolising emancipation from bondage; an equilateral triangle, symbolising equality; and the all-seeing eye of Providence (a masonic symbol). The revolutionaries thus drew on appropriate aspects of classical and religious imagery, familiar under the Old Regime, and adapted them to a new ideology after 1789.

## 2.6 Enlightenment, revolution and reform – the departments.

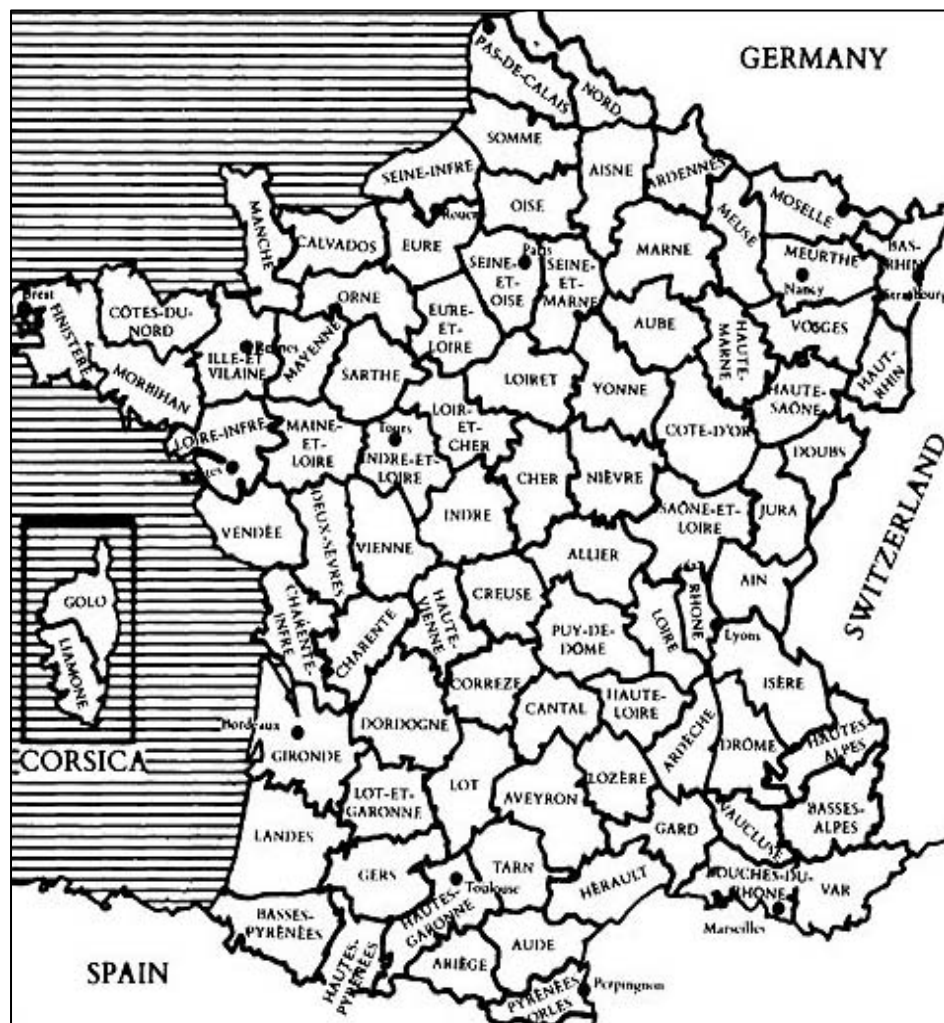
Old Regime France was a confused welter of overlapping administrative, judicial and fiscal divisions and authorities (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 The French provinces, 1789. Photo: John Paxton, Companion to the French Revolution, Facts on File, New York and Oxford, 1988. Reproduced by permission of John Paxton.



There were 83 new administrative units created in January 1790 by decree of the Assembly, most of which exist to this day. They were subdivided into districts, and these in turn into cantons and communes (or municipalities).

Figure 3 The departments of revolutionary France, 1790. Photo: Franklin L. Ford, Europe 1780–1830, 2nd edn, Longman, Harlow, 1989. Reprinted by permission of Pearson Education Limited.



#### Exercise 6.

Look at Figure 3, a map showing the departments (départements). These were the 83 new administrative units created in January 1790 by decree of the Assembly. Compare Figure 3 with Figure 2 (a map showing the 35 provinces of pre-revolutionary France). State what significant differences you notice. Give examples.

#### Discussion

*There are two main differences. First, the departments are of roughly equal size, in contrast to the haphazard former provinces, such as the Bourbonnais and Auvergne. Second, a department is usually named after a geographical feature, normally a river or mountain. For example, departments named after rivers include Gironde, Somme, Seine et Marne, Moselle, Upper and Lower Rhine (Haut-Rhin, Bas-Rhin). Departments named after mountains include the High, Low and Eastern Pyrenees (Hautes-Pyrénées, Basses-Pyrénées and Pyrénées Orientales), Vosges, Jura, Higher and Lower Alps (Hautes-Alpes, Basses-Alpes). The departments were established on the rational and scientific basis of equal size, and were named not after historical or traditional associations but in accordance with natural features.*

Power was decentralised and allocated to elected constituencies. Administration was entrusted to officials elected by local taxpayers, to a general council in the department and to a mayor in each commune.

### 3 From 1789 to the flight to Varennes.

#### 3.1 The moderate reformers.

1789–92 was a period of relatively moderate reform in the spirit of the Enlightenment – moderate, that is, compared with what followed. It was certainly revolutionary in relation to what went before. The Constituent Assembly (August 1789–September 1791) and its successor, the Legislative Assembly (October 1791–August 1792), comprising educated members of the Third Estate joined by liberal-minded nobles and clergy, were satisfied with the transformation of absolute monarchy into a parliamentary system, a constitutional monarchy under a constitution introduced in 1791.

Political power lay with the Assembly, which was run by wealthy property-holders. Their object 'was not to effect a social revolution but to create a more open society in which opportunities previously restricted to birth, should now be open to talent' (Hampson, 1975, p. 95).

#### 3.2 Popular violence and the Revolution.

The deputies were concerned to protect property and maintain order (as the 1790 decree on the abolition of nobility suggests) in the face of a growing breakdown of public order; and their attitude to the masses – to what the demagogic journalist Jean-Paul Marat (1744–93) called *le petit peuple* (the little people), the millions of

propertyless, distressed, violent and unpredictable 'fellow citizens' – was one of growing apprehension. The people traditionally rioted when bread was short, and increasingly they came out on the streets to take 'direct action' – that is, to take the law into their own hands – their expectations aroused by the sweeping changes taking place.

The masses were an ever-present threat to orderly reform. The leaders of the Paris crowd were political activists who called themselves *sans-culottes* (literally 'without breeches', because they wore trousers rather than the knee-breeches or *culottes* associated with the upper classes –see Plate 1). The *sans-culottes* were from what may be called the lower middle class – to be distinguished from the idle and the unemployed. The 'cream' of the *sans-culottes* included artisans and tradesmen, master craftsmen and small shopkeepers, but their followers were hired labourers, porters, waiters, janitors and barbers. Through demonstrations and street violence the *sans-culottes* forced events faster and further than the current leaders of opinion desired.

A nationwide panic or 'Great Fear' accompanied the Assembly's decrees of August 1789 abolishing feudalism and privilege in France. The king, unhappy at his new, diminished role and at being required to assent to so many revolutionary measures, and encouraged by his family and royalist supporters to resist, at first refused to promulgate the decrees of 4 August and the Declaration of the Rights of Man. 'I will never allow my clergy and my nobility to be stripped of their assets', he declared (quoted in Vovelle, 1984, p.114).

In October, when the king's personal guards at Versailles were seen to trample on the tricolour, the National Guard reacted, caught up in a revived fear that Louis might attempt to close the Assembly by force. A crowd of Parisian women, marching to the Assembly at Versailles to protest against rising bread prices, advanced on the royal palace. With the acquiescence and even cooperation of the National Guard, including Lafayette, they forced the royal family to return with them to Paris, where the king, virtually a prisoner in the Tuileries palace, now ignominiously assented to the decrees.

Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* became the bible across Europe of what was to become known as conservatism. From the first, Burke opposed the Revolution on principle. He deplored the sudden break with custom and tradition, and the implementation of change based on abstract principles (such as the rights of man) drawn from the Enlightenment. He abhorred the egalitarianism and lack of deference to nobility and monarchy, and the running amok of what he called 'the swinish multitude'. He foresaw bloodshed.

The majority of the deputies, under Lafayette, were determined to preserve order and to keep power in the hands of the representatives of the responsible and the propertied. Branches of the National Guard were established across France. In December 1789 the Assembly drew a distinction between 'active' (that is, monied) and 'passive' (propertyless) citizens. Only the former were eligible to participate in the election of deputies. An electorate of four and a half million male taxpayers chose some 50,000 'electors', who paid even higher tax and who in turn elected the deputies to the Assembly (and the candidates for public office). The deputies and office-holders themselves were qualified to stand by virtue of the still higher taxes which they paid. Even so, the electorate was far broader than any in the rest of Europe, where even these provisions seemed 'madly democratic' (Palmer, 1971, p. 70). The French radicals, however, pointed to the 'aristocracy of the rich' (a phrase coined by Marat), which was replacing the old feudal 'aristocracy of birth'.

### **3.3 The divide over the Church, 1790.**

The revolutionaries of 1789 also aspired to reform the Catholic Church in France, though not to disestablish it, still less to de-Christianise the country. Many of the clergy themselves favoured reform. In August 1789 the Assembly deprived the Church of its income by abolishing the tithe. In November it decreed the sequestration (nationalisation) of church lands, roughly 10 per cent of all land in France, for public sale. The Assembly was prompted by the same need to raise revenue to pay off the national debt which had led to the summoning of the Estates-General.

But the programme of church reform was also ideological, inspired by the rationalism and humanitarianism of the Enlightenment. In February 1790 the Assembly abolished the monastic orders and also proclaimed civic equality for Protestants. In July 1790 it introduced the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, which cut the number of Catholic bishoprics from 135 to 83, allocating one diocese for each department, and made provision for a salaried clergy appointed by popular election. These startling changes were introduced by the Assembly without consulting the Catholic Church.

A deep and lasting break between Catholic opinion and the Revolution came in November 1790, when the Assembly forced the issue by requiring the clergy to swear allegiance to the constitution (including the Civil Constitution of the Clergy). Almost half the ordinary clergy refused to take the oath, and only seven bishops

assented, while the Pope denounced the Civil Constitution (and by implication the Revolution) in April 1791. The clergy who refused to take the oath (known as non-jurors) were imprisoned or went into exile – 30,000 priests had left France by 1799 – swelling the ranks of the émigrés and turning tensions between church and state into an ideological divide between supporters and enemies of the Revolution.

A published protest by a former deputy of the nobility to the Estates-General shows how divisive the issue of the oath could be. Marat's *L'Ami du peuple* from December 1790 provides evidence of the mounting extremism threatening the moderates.

### **3.4 Monarchy and the Revolution – the flight to Varennes, 1791.**

The task of the moderates was further complicated by the ambiguous attitude of the royal family. From the first there were royalists who refused to compromise with the Revolution, including Louis XVI's younger brothers, the comte de Provence (later Louis XVIII) and the comte d'Artois (later Charles X), who left France as émigrés and fomented counter-revolution from abroad. By 1791 half the noble officers in the French army had resigned their commissions. Weak, shifty and out of his depth, Louis XVI remained suspicious of the Revolution and hostile to the constitution. As a practising Catholic, he was profoundly disturbed by the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. Still more antagonistic was the queen, Marie-Antoinette, whose brother was the Habsburg emperor. Marie-Antoinette opposed any compromise with the Revolution. 'Only armed force', she wrote, 'can put things right' (Hampson, 1975, p. 98). In June 1791 the royal family attempted to flee to a place of safety on the eastern frontier of France, from where Louis, with the implicit threat of armed foreign assistance, proposed to renegotiate terms with the Assembly. They were caught at Varennes (the episode is known as the flight to Varennes) and were returned to Paris under guard. Once more they were virtually prisoners.

'The flight to Varennes opened up the second great schism of the Revolution' (Doyle, 2001, p. 47). The king's loyalty to the Revolution and his credibility as a constitutional monarch were fatally compromised. So was the cause of moderate, liberal constitutionalism in France. In July 1791 an anti-royalist demonstration took place in the Champ-de-Mars in Paris. It was put down by the National Guard under Lafayette, and some 50 demonstrators were killed. What later became known as the massacre of the Champ-de-Mars further polarised opinion.

For the moderates of 1789, the Revolution had gone far enough. Confidence in constitutional monarchy would be restored, they hoped, by the king's formal assent to the new constitution in September 1791. From the spring of 1792 onwards, however, the cause of moderation was under continual challenge: on the one hand, from the king's unreliability and the threat of foreign intervention and counter-revolution, and, on the other, from the sans-culottes, militant agitators and radical intellectuals in and outside the Assembly.

## **4 Europe and the French Revolution.**

### **4.1 Intellectual, governmental and monarchical responses.**

There was much sympathy among intellectuals abroad for the Revolution, which seemed to be putting so many Enlightenment ideals into practice. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant was among the first to hail the Revolution as a unique historical phenomenon, and these early reactions were shared by Fichte, Herder, Schiller and Goethe. Enthusiasts in Britain included the radical Thomas Paine, author of *The Rights of Man* (1791), Mary Wollstonecraft, author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), poets such as Burns, Blake, Coleridge and Wordsworth, and, initially, the campaigner against slavery William Wilberforce, a man of deep religious conviction. In later years Wordsworth recalled his emotions of 1789 in a celebrated couplet:

- **Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,**
- **But to be young was very Heaven!**

What was the attitude of the French revolutionaries to Europe? In May 1790 the Assembly resolved that 'the French nation renounces involvement in any war undertaken with the aim of making conquests' and that 'it will never use force against the liberty of any people' (Vovelle, 1984, p. 123). This was not, however, regarded as incompatible with wars of 'liberation' to spread the Revolution abroad. In the boast of the radical deputy Pierre Chaumette: 'The land which separates Paris from St Petersburg will soon be gallicized, municipalized, jacobinized' (quoted in Furet, 1996, p. 104).

How did the European monarchs react? A letter from Leopold II, Austrian emperor, to Catherine II, empress of Russia, in July 1791 and the Declaration of Pillnitz of August 1791, written immediately after the flight to Varennes, indicate the attitude to the Revolution of the monarchies of Austria and Prussia. Both were 'open' documents, intended to influence public opinion across France and Europe and to be understood as expressions of solidarity between the rulers of Austria and Prussia, speaking on behalf of European monarchs generally. In the

letter to Catherine, Leopold expresses indignation at the treatment of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette and his fears for their safety. He sees in the 'dangerous excesses of the French Revolution' a threat to monarchs and political stability generally. The Revolution had thus become an international issue. The Declaration of Pillnitz is an appeal for support by the Austrian and Prussian monarchs to the other European monarchs and a warning of possible military intervention in France.

The rulers of Britain and continental Europe in 1792 were alarmed by the Revolution, but not so much that they took serious steps to suppress it. Kaunitz, the Austrian chancellor, indeed protested against intervening in France's internal affairs as unnecessary. Austria, Prussia and Russia acted in traditional fashion by taking advantage of the weakness to which they supposed the Revolution had brought France, in order to complete the partition of France's former protégé, Poland, swallowed up by Russia and Prussia in the partitions of 1793 and 1795.

It was the French who declared war. They were not to know how far Austria and Prussia were serious in their threats. What they did know was that in 1787 the Prussians had intervened militarily in Holland, while the Austrians in 1788 had sent their troops into the Austrian Netherlands (Belgium), in each case to suppress a revolutionary uprising. In April 1792 France declared war on the Habsburg ruler of Austria, Emperor Francis (Leopold's successor), and invaded the Austrian Netherlands (present-day Belgium). In November the Assembly decreed that France offered 'fraternal assistance to all peoples wishing to recover their liberty'. Once hostilities began, the Declaration of Brunswick (August 1792) issued by the Duke of Brunswick, commanding the Prussian and Austrian armies, threatened to put Paris to sword and fire should any harm befall the French royal family. War between France and European monarchs spread the Revolution beyond France's frontiers, and inspired an ulterior goal of securing for France the 'natural frontier' of the Rhine.

#### **4.2 Political polarization and the fall of the monarchy.**

By 1792 the liberal constitutionalists of 1789, men like Lafayette, found themselves increasingly on the defensive. There was growing hostility to the National Assembly, with its limited franchise and 'aristocracy of the rich'. A fringe of radical deputies seated on the left of the Assembly (the political terms 'left' and 'right' date from this period) were supported in Paris and across France by numerous radical political organizations or 'clubs', notably a club calling itself the Society of the Friends of the Constitution (and later Society of the Friends of Liberty and Equality) – better known as the Jacobin club. Foremost among the Jacobin deputies in the Assembly was Maximilien de Robespierre (1758–94), a fervent disciple of Rousseau, who seemed to believe himself the embodiment of the 'general will' and republican virtue.

In September 1791 the National Assembly, after the two years which it had allotted itself to enact a constitution, duly dissolved itself, transferring its powers to a Legislative Assembly, from election to which, at Robespierre's suggestion, it quixotically barred its own members. There were thus no experienced deputies, and there was an influx of younger radical revolutionaries. Half the deputies were under 30.

Outside the Assembly, the pressure of the 'clubs' and the growing politicisation of the sans-culottes were accompanied by a torrent of publications released under the right to freedom of the press laid down in the Declaration of the Rights of Man. By 1791 there were 150 newspapers, including much inflammatory journalism, in which issues were personalised and political opponents were blackguarded. Notorious among these 'tabloids' of the day were Jacques Hébert's *Le Père Duchesne* (Old Man Duchesne), with a circulation running to 200,000, larded with foul invective, and Jean-Paul Marat's daily *L'Ami du peuple* (The People's Friend), both of which continually incited the sans-culottes to violence. As early as 1789 Marat had declared: 'The political machine can only be wound up by violence, just as the air can only be cleared by words' (Vovelle, 1984, p. 209).

Objects of attack included the usual targets – aristocrats and priests and increasingly the royal family – and also extended to the 'active citizens' who supported and administered the new France – the authorities and members of the National Assembly.

In-fighting increased in the Assembly and radicalised it. By May 1792 the Assembly was falling under the influence of the Jacobins and other extreme factions such as the Girondins, who decreed the deportation of non-juring priests and the death sentence for counter-revolutionary émigrés. In June the Assembly called for a levy of 20,000 volunteers to defend Paris from its enemies at home and abroad. When the king vetoed the measure, the Girondins called for mass demonstrations outside the Tuileries. An armed crowd of sans-culottes broke into the palace and forced Louis to wear the red cap of liberty. On 10 August a body of sans-culottes, national guards and others sacked the Tuileries. The king's 600 Swiss guards, whom Louis ordered not to fire on the crowd, were massacred. The royal family took refuge in the Assembly, from where they were transferred, as prisoners, to a secure fortress in Paris. The cause of constitutional monarchy was drowned in violence and bloodshed.

#### **4.3 Birth of the republic: war, civil war and terror.**



After the church and monarchy, 'war was the third great polarizing issue of the Revolution' (Doyle, 2001, p. 50). With a declaration by the Assembly in July 1792 of *la patrie en danger* (the fatherland in danger), Prussian troops on French soil in August, and the fall of the border fortress of Verdun in September, there was mass panic in Paris, with accusations of treachery against the king and queen, Lafayette (who fled abroad), 'aristocrats' and priests. In the 'September massacre', some 1,400 priests and suspected counter-revolutionaries were dragged from prison by rampaging *sans-culottes*, and together with common criminals and prostitutes were wantonly butchered. Le Père Duchesne egged on the perpetrators, while the minister of justice, Georges Danton (1759–94), did nothing. 'The French Revolution, anti-noble almost from the start, had also turned anti-clerical, anti-monarchical and (with the September massacres) terroristic' (Doyle, 1999, p. xv).

On 20 September 1792, under pressure from Robespierre and the Jacobins, the Legislative Assembly was replaced by a National Convention. (The term was taken from the Constitutional Convention which drew up the US Constitution in 1787.) The significance of this appeared two days later, when the Convention duly decreed the abolition of the monarchy and the creation of the French Republic with a new constitution. Theoretically, the legislature was now – for the first time in modern history – elected by universal male suffrage. In practice, only one-tenth of the electorate – the *sans-culottes* – ventured to vote.

In January 1793 Louis XVI was tried by the Convention for so-called crimes against the nation. Addressed by his surname ('citizen Capet') just like any other citizen, he was, by a narrow majority vote, sentenced to death. He was guillotined in what became the place de la Revolution (formerly place Louis XV, now place de la Concorde). Marie-Antoinette, long defamed as 'the Austrian bitch' on suspicion of scheming for Austria's interests, was guillotined in October. Again, the Revolution made a violent break with the French past and in doing so issued a defiant challenge to the rest of Europe. In Danton's words, 'France threw down its gauntlet to Europe, and that gauntlet was the head of a king' (quoted in Doyle, 1989, p. 4; Figure 4 shows, beneath the severed head of Louis XVI, the words from the Marseillaise: 'Let impure blood water our furrows.' The caption reads: 'Monday 21 January 1793 at 10.15 a.m. on the place de la Revolution formerly called place Louis XV. The tyrant fell beneath the sword of the laws.'

**Figure 4 Villeneuve, *Matière à réflexion pour les jongleurs couronnées* (Matter for thought for crowned twisters), 1793, engraving, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris**

This great act of justice appalled the aristocracy, destroyed the superstition of royalty, and created the republic. It stamps a great character on the National Convention and renders it worthy of the confidence of the French ...

In vain did an audacious faction and some insidious orators exhaust all the resources of calumny, charlatanism and chicane; the courage of the republicans triumphed: the majority of the Convention remained unshakeable in its principles, and the genius of intrigue yielded to the genius of Liberty and the ascendancy of virtue. Extract from the 3rd letter of Maximilien Robespierre to his constituents' (trans. Lentin)).

Attitudes became still more polarised. The Convention organized a determined resistance to foreign invasion, combined with action against those in France still loyal to the cause of monarchy. By 1793 France was not only at war with most of the European states, a war which continued until 1799, but also in a state of virtual civil war – and with intensified civil war came mounting violence and extremism. Figure 5 shows the invasion points of the First Coalition against France (Austria, Prussia, Holland, Britain, Spain and the kingdom of Sardinia) and the locations of internal resistance to the Revolution in 1792–3. There were two key centres of long-term resistance:





the royalist insurgents, known as the 'Chouans', of Normandy and Brittany, and a massive uprising in the Vendee south of the Loire in 1793.

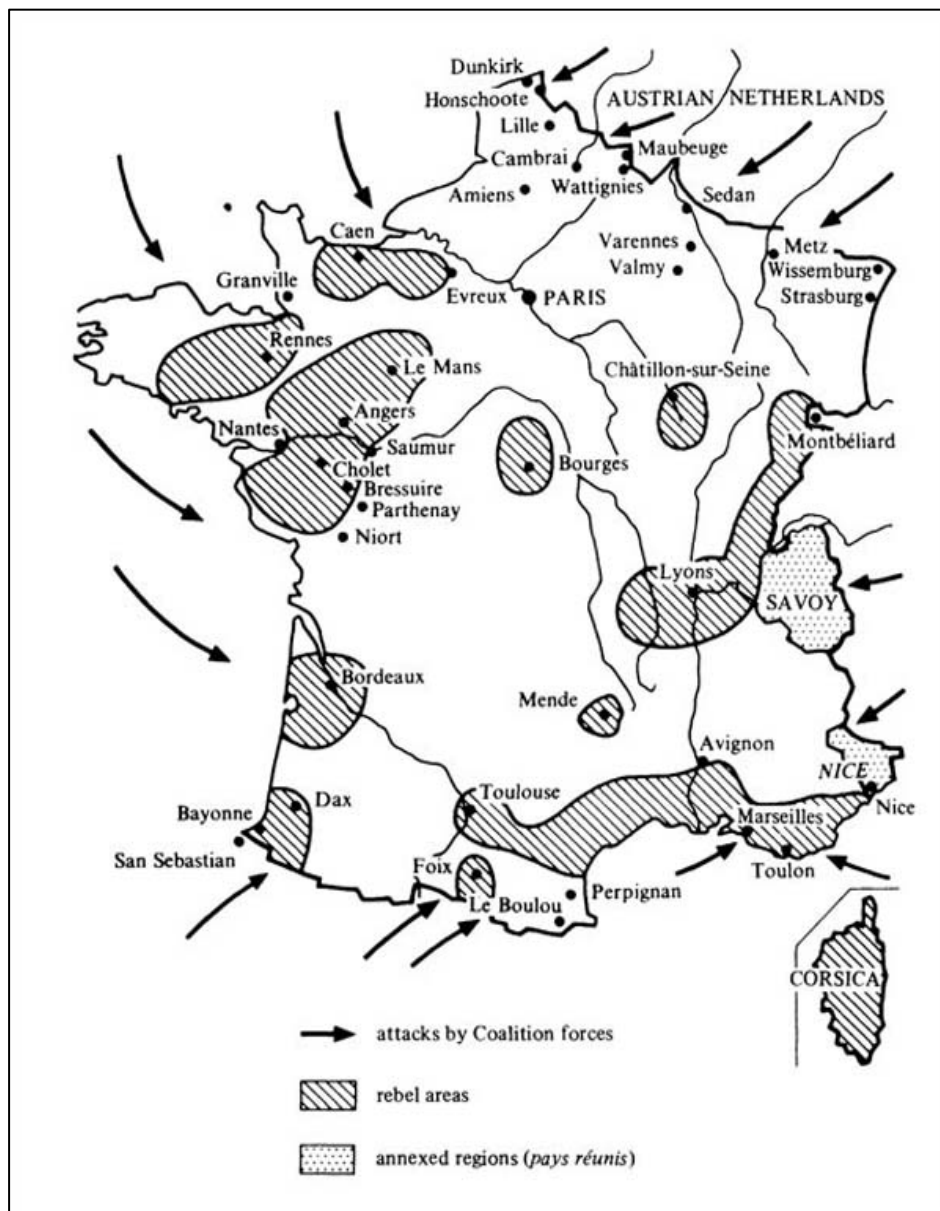
From this time, until the enemies of France have been expelled from the territory of the Republic, all Frenchmen are in a state of permanent requisition for the army.

(Anthology I, p. 90)

Figure 5 The republic under internal and external attack, 1793.

Photo: Marc Bouloiseau, *The Jacobin Republic 1792–1794*, Cambridge University Press, 1983

So began the decree on the Levée en masse issued by the Convention in August 1793, a compulsory call-up of 750,000 men (all single men aged 18–25) and the harnessing of all human and material resources. It was in effect a 'declaration of total war' (Blanning, 2000, p. 253), which unleashed enthusiastic support from the forces of popular radicalism in Paris and elsewhere – notably the sans-culottes – and provoked armed resistance from the forces of counter-revolution in the Vendee and around Bordeaux, Lyons and Marseilles. The Mediterranean port of Toulon, occupied by the British fleet, defected to the British. By August 1793, 60 departments, or three-quarters of the total, were declared to be in a state of rebellion.



The Girondins, who dominated the Convention from September 1792, were ousted in May 1793 by the Jacobins under Robespierre with the help of 80,000 armed sans-culottes. A further constitution was introduced in June 1793, more democratic than that of 1791, but it was suspended for the duration of the war.

The twelve months from July 1793 to July 1794 were known as the period of war government, revolutionary government, or simply the Terror. Real power was vested in a so-called Committee of Public Safety, in effect a war cabinet of 12 members of the Convention. The Committee took direct charge of mobilising France's material and human resources, fixing wages and prices, calling up and provisioning the army – and eradicating internal opposition.

End.