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The Shaping of the "Second Europe" by Revolutions, 1750-1914

The French Revolution, 1789-1815

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Intellectual Preparation for the Revolution

As we saw in earlier sessions, the philosophes or Enlightenment intellectuals prepared the way for the French Revolution by denouncing existing political, social, and economic conditions. Though they did not advocate revolution itself, their writings and activities subjected existing institutions to a thorough-going criticism which prepared the way intellectually for the assault which came at the hands of others.

Philosophes put forward two important concepts which we have already examined. The first of these was the natural rights theory. Life, liberty and property are inherent and inalienable rights of man. If man does not enjoy these rights, there is but one way to regain them--by reconstituting society. Locke and Jefferson said it plainly. Equally important was the contract theory: government rests on the consent of the governed. Sovereignty belongs to the people, not the king. The natural corollary of this idea is that any government which flouts the will of the people may be abolished. Again, philosophes did not preach revolution. They sought only to change the existing system, not to erect a new one. They hoped "enlightened" despots would carry out their ideas because they saw this as the only means of reform and progress. Violent change was the farthest thing from their minds.

Still, their ideas were capable of being made revolutionary. They offered the French people a justification for leveling the old order and building a new one. "It was impossible," wrote one who made the Revolution, "that we should not receive with enthusiasm the hopes which men of genius held out to us of a future where humanity, tolerance, and liberty would reign instead of the errors, follies, and prejudices which had so long enslaved and embittered the world. We were soothed by the seductive dreams of a philosophy that sought to assure the happiness of the race. Voltaire charmed our intelligence, and Rousseau touched our hearts." Furthermore, these ideas had already been put into practice in America. This successful revolution gave a powerful stimulus to revolutionary ideas in France. French

soldiers had fought in America and returned home full of enthusiasm for the new society being created there. To many the success of the American rebellion demonstrated the truth of the democratic doctrine of natural rights. So the philosophes articulated ideas conducive to revolution and these ideas gave voice to the grievances and aspirations of the French lower and middle classes. What were these grievances? These are best shown by looking at the society and government of France under the Old Regime.

France Under the Old Regime

France under the *ancien regime* was an absolute monarchy. Under Louis XIV who ruled from 1643 to 1715 France had been rather efficiently governed. But by the time of Louis XVI in 1789 it was ruled incompetently and chaotically. France was bankrupt because of long wars and lavish court expenditures. So large was the national debt that it took 3/5's of the annual revenue simply to pay the interest on it. The problem was that the lower and middle classes were over-burdened with taxation and the upper class and Church paid almost none.

France was faced with three big problems.

- (1) The government was characterized by confusion and incompetence. Red tape and overlapping administrative responsibilities hamstrung those who wanted to bring order and efficiency to government.
- (2) The law was corrupted by favoritism. The aristocracy and the Church were accorded special status before the law. The legal system itself was confused. According to scholars, there were at least 300 distinct legal codes in France before 1789.
- (3) Industry and commerce were restricted by regulation and economic provincialism. Under the policy of mercantilism, government tried to regulate industry and commerce for the national interest. But the effect of that policy was to stifle the economy. In addition, provincialism crippled economic initiative. Each province levied its own tolls and customs; different standards of weights and measures were applied throughout France.

In society there were also many problems. Many of these stemmed from the rigid feudal organization of classes which still prevailed. All Frenchmen of any consequence were in one of three classes: the First Estate (clergy), the Second Estate (nobility), or the Third Estate (everyone else). Together these classes not only constituted the social order, but also the Estates General, the traditional feudal assembly of France. These first two classes consisted of only about 2% of the population. Bishops and abbots of the Church enjoyed large incomes and were exempt from taxes for the most part. At the bottom of the First Estate, the parish priests were grossly underpaid and barely lived above the level of their parishioners. The nobility of the Second Estate were the largest privileged class. They had performed no useful functions since Louis XIV who had stripped them of duties and made their function purely ceremonial. But nobles still retained the social position they had enjoyed since medieval times. They had the exclusive right to higher offices in the Church and state. They were exempt from most taxes and evaded those they were assessed. But they continued to collect the feudal dues of labor and money they were owed by the peasants on their lands. Finally there was the Third Estate, the bulk of the population, whose interests were opposed to the other two estates. They were a diverse group ranging from the upper middle class, the great merchants, industrialists and financiers, down to the shopkeepers, lawyers and others able to pay taxes. Peasants and others owning no land were left out. The Third Estate took the lead in demanding economic reforms, social equality, equal taxation for all, equal opportunity to hold the highest offices. They wanted to curb lavish court expenditures which contributed to the crippling national debt and threatened the stability of the economy. They favored a constitution which could limit the arbitrary powers of the monarch and nobility. They wanted greater freedom of thought and economic activity. Peasants who had no direct part in political

life unless they owned land, but who had spokesmen in the Third Estate, wanted reforms to end feudal dues owed to the nobility. Among all members of the Third Estate was a demand for reform, for a new state of things based on justice and freedom, and a deep hatred of the *ancien regime*.

The Revolution Begins

Against the backdrop of ideas of the philosophes and the sorry state of French society, there was widespread dissatisfaction which caused Louis XVI and a succession of ministers to attempt reforms. Nothing came of these attempts. In the 1780's a spirit of revolt gradually gained strength. A series of bad harvests raised feelings, as did an unfavorable commercial treaty with England in 1788 which cost Frenchmen jobs. People came to regard the government and the King as the cause of their troubles and began venting these feelings publicly. [Queen Marie Antoinette](#) was greeted with a placard on her box at the opera which read "Tremble tyrants! Your reign is ending!" On top of this growing dissatisfaction was the financial crisis of the government. Money to pay the national debt had to be raised. Since the nobility and Church continued to refuse to pay, the only alternative was to turn to the middle and lower classes, which meant calling the Estates General. It is a measure of the desperate state of things that the monarchy had not called this body together since 1614.

In 1789 the Estates General met and the Third Estate immediately set about demanding reform. Determined to get reforms from Louis XVI in return for new taxes, they focused on grievances ([cahiers](#)) which they had brought from the localities. Within the month they had formed themselves into a National Assembly led by a nobleman, the Count Mirabeau. Since the other two estates refused to join them, except for defectors such as Mirabeau, they were a single house assembly. They swore not to disband until they had produced a constitution for France.

Almost immediately popular support swelled for the National Assembly. On July 14, 1789 a mob stormed the royal prison in Paris, the Bastille, and destroyed it as a symbol of oppression. During the following months revolutionary fever spread throughout France. It was open season on the nobles and their estates. Bands of men and women armed themselves, burned chateaux, destroyed the records which obligated them to feudal dues, and chased nobles out of the country. In Paris the National Assembly confirmed these acts by decreeing that feudalism and manorialism was dead in France. In August in the most symbolic of its revolutionary gestures the Assembly adopted a [Declaration of the Rights of Man](#), the French equivalent of the American document. The Assembly intended it as a universal declaration, not just for Frenchmen but for all mankind. For the first time Revolution had become universal. "We wish," said one of the authors, "to make a declaration of rights for all men, for all time, and for all countries, and thus serve as an example for the world."

Some of the ringing phrases of this [Declaration](#):

- (1) "Men are born and remain free and equal in rights."
- (2) "The source of all sovereignty is essentially in the nation [people]."
- (3) "Liberty consists in the power to do anything that does not injure others."
- (4) "Law is the expression of the general will."
- (5) "Free communication of thought and opinion is one of the most precious rights of man."
- (6) "No one should be disturbed on account of his opinions, even religious, provided their manifestation does not derange the public order established by law."

(7) "All citizens, being equal in the eyes of the law, are equally admissible to all dignities, places, and public employment according to their capacity, and without further distinction other than their virtue and talents."

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1. An interesting American footnote: The Marquis de Lafayette sent George Washington one of the keys to the Bastille. It is [displayed today](#) at Mt Vernon, Washington's home. Look for it when you go.
 2. Which do you prefer, the language and ideas of the Declaration of the Rights of Man or the Declaration of Independence?
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Where did these ideas come from? The philosophes, here collected in one place. The Declaration repudiated the Old Regime and held out hope for reform to end its worst features. There was no mention yet of abolishing monarchy.

Reforms did begin in France as the National Assembly changed the Old Regime. In 1791 a new constitution was finally adopted which provided for a Legislative Assembly representative of all who could pay a tax worth 3 days labor. Louis XVI was a constitutional monarch with only veto power. Had Louis accepted this arrangement, it might have worked like the British model. But Louis XVI and his family attempted to escape the country and appealed to other monarchs to restore the old order. Mirabeau, a moderate leader, died. So when Prussia and Austria sent an army to invade France, the Revolution turned radical. A faction called the Jacobins seized power and began mass trials of aristocrats. Louis XVI was dethroned in 1792 and a Republic was proclaimed.

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Why do you think the French Revolution became more radical than the American? Was it the French temperament, or what?

Further Progress of the Revolution

The foreign invasion by Prussian and Austrian armies was hurled back in a surge of patriotic nationalism, the first instance of this modern phenomenon. The Legislative Assembly gave way to a National Convention, directed by a Committee of Public Safety of extreme republicans led by Georges Danton and Maximilien Robespierre. A Reign of Terror began. Anyone suspected of being hostile to the Revolution was hauled before the Convention or some other tribunal, convicted, and executed by guillotine. The most dramatic trials were those of Louis XVI (called Louis Capet) and Marie Antoinette. Louis found guilty of treason, and conspiracy against the liberty and safety of the nation, was quickly convicted and [executed](#) in 1793 like a common citizen. Marie Antoinette's death followed later. As shocking were the series of changes ushering in a new society and social order. All titles were abolished, even "Monsieur" and "Madame". In their place were "citizen" and "citizeness". Other reforms symbolized a radical new age: calendar

reform; a new civil code; public education; the abolishing of the Roman Catholic state church and the beginning of the worship of Reason. The world seemed to be turned upside down and revolution seemed to be spreading everywhere. French armies went on the offensive against the powers which opposed them. The Convention proclaimed that the nation would not "lay down its arms until the sovereignty and liberty of the people on whose territories the French armies shall have entered, shall be established." It promised further the "suppression of all established authorities...the abolition of the tithe, of feudalism, of seigniorial rights...of real and personal servitude...and generally of all privileges." This was in effect a great crusade to make the world safe for natural rights and republican government. As French armies prevailed they carried the seeds of democracy and republicanism with them. Even Napoleon, no republican himself, never repudiated the cause of republicanism. When he embarked on expansionist wars he frequently justified them by proclamations of republican aspirations, even after he made himself Emperor of the French.

The extreme phase of the Revolution soon ended. By 1794 the Jacobins had lost power and fallen to the guillotine themselves in many instances. Reaction set in. A new constitution set up a Directory and a two-house legislature. But the Directory could not cope with the problems of governing France. As anarchy and disorder threatened, Napoleon Bonaparte seized power in 1799.

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1. I'm getting ahead of myself, but Edmund Burke, Conservative theorist, said the French Revolution was doomed to fail and usher in a dictatorship because of its violent, radical character. Prophetic, No?

Napoleon and His Significance in the French Revolution

As First Consul and then as Emperor of the French, [Napoleon](#) preserved republican forms and ideals. But he reimposed and perfected the efficiency and ruthlessness of the Jacobins who had taken the Revolution through a Reign of Terror. He said about himself and the Revolution:

"We have finished the romance of the Revolution, we must now begin its history, only seeking for what is real and practicable in the application of its principles, and not what is speculative and hypothetical."

He kept the ideal of equality and the land reforms of the National Assembly. He spoke of embodying the sovereignty of the people in his own person and office. But he spoke little of liberty: it was bad for discipline. He stamped out political debate, muzzled the press, and watched his enemies with a secret police whose effectiveness even a 21st century dictator could admire.

He transformed France in many essential ways. He reorganized the administrative districts of France and continued all the republican reforms and internal improvements. He completed the civil code, named after him the [Code Napoleon](#), which ended the confusing legal jurisdictions in France. He restored national finances and reformed the tax system.

Abroad, his successful [imperial wars \(check out this link for fun\)](#) spread egalitarian and republican ideas wherever his armies went. Feudalism, class privilege, chaotic economic organization, and outworn institutions ended in those areas under French control. The Napoleonic Code also prevailed, even to the extent that it continued to exert influence after his downfall in countries like Germany and Italy. Napoleon found, however, that equality and liberty were double-sided: when subject peoples rose up against his armies, they used the ideas learned from the French. For example, when the Spanish revolted against France and set up a constitution, they turned to the Revolution as their model. And the Germans in the 1813 uprising against Napoleon demanded the liberty "for which the French had made them yearn."

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1. Let's talk for a minute about Napoleon's Code. Strengthening the family by placing emphasis on the father/husband? The disparity between men and women's rights? Your opinion?
 2. The place of strong figures in making changes? Is it ever good? Necessary some times?
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Impact of the French Revolution on the Second Europe

The French Revolution loosed ideas and forces which upset the social and political structure of Europe. Few periods before this 25 year period (1790-1815) were so dynamic. In its early stages the Revolution seemed to confirm the hopes of the philosophes and the tenets of the Enlightenment. Using the watchwords of the Second Europe--Progress, Reason, Liberty, Equality, Fraternity--revolutionaries overthrew a sick and corrupt order in France and put a new one in its place, as Locke and Jefferson had envisioned. But the changes, bewildering and wide-reaching, took place too rapidly, too violently and radically. Those who defeated Napoleon saw the dangerous side of all this change and the ideals which brought it about. They thought the ideas of the Enlightenment or Second Europe had led to excesses and they wanted to make sure another French Revolution or Napoleon never happened again. Their solution was a policy of reaction and suppression of revolution, the philosophy for which was Conservatism. We turn to that topic next.