The French Revolution and Napoleon, 1789–1815

The French Revolution establishes a new political order, Napoleon Bonaparte gains and loses an empire, and European states forge a balance of power.

Napoleon Bonaparte crossing the Great Saint Bernard pass in 1801. Painting, Jacques Louis David.

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The French Revolution

Napoleon

The Congress of Vienna

SECTION 1

The French Revolution Begins

The Old Order

• Old Regime—social and political system in France during the 1770s
• Estates—three social classes of France’s Old Regime

The Privileged Estates

• First Estate—Catholic clergy—own 10 percent land, pay few taxes
• Second Estate—rich nobles—2 percent population, own 20 percent land

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The Third Estate

• 97 percent of people are peasants, urban workers, middle class
• Have few privileges, pay heavy taxes, want change

The Forces of Change

Enlightenment Ideas

• Enlightenment ideas inspire some in Third Estate

Economic Troubles

• High taxes and rising costs damage economy by 1780s
• King Louis XVI and his wife Marie Antoinette known for extravagance
• Louis doubles nation’s debt; banks refuse to lend more money

A Weak Leader

• Louis’s poor decisions and lack of patience add to France’s problems
• He calls Estates-General—meeting of representatives from all three estates
Dawn of the Revolution

The National Assembly
- Third Estate has little power under old rules
- Sieyès persuades them to make major changes in French government
- Third Estate sets up National Assembly—new legislature to make reforms
- Tennis Court Oath—delegates decide to write new constitution for France

Storming the Bastille
- Rumors fly in Paris that Louis wants to suppress National Assembly
- Mob attacks and seizes Bastille, killing guards on July 14, 1789

A Great Fear Sweeps France

Rebellion
- Rumors and panic spread throughout France
- Great Fear—attacks by peasants taking place across France
- Peasants destroy legal papers binding them to feudal system
- In October 1789, Parisian women revolt over rising price of bread
- They demand action, forcing Louis to return from Versailles to Paris

Section 2

Revolution Brings Reform and Terror

The Assembly Reforms France
- National Assembly adopts Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen
- Revolutionary leaders use the slogan, “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity”

A State-Controlled Church
- National Assembly seizes church lands, turns clergy into public officials
- This action alarms many peasants, who are devout Catholics

Divisions Develop

Louis Tries to Escape
- Louis, worried about his future, attempts to escape France
- Revolutionaries catch the royal family near Netherlands’ border

Factions Split France
- Major problems, including debt, food shortages remain
- Assembly split into Radicals, Moderates, Conservatives
- Émigrés—nobles who flee country, want Old Regime back in power
- Sans-culottes—lower class who want more change from the Revolution
Problems with Other Countries
- Austrians and Prussians want Louis in charge of France; France declares war

France at War
- Prussian forces soon threaten to attack Paris
- Parisian mob jails royal family, kills guards
- Mob breaks into prisons, killing over 1,000, including many who support king
- Pressured by mob, Legislative Assembly deposes the king and then dissolves
- National Convention takes office in September, forming French republic

Jacobins Take Control
- Jacobins—radical political organization behind 1792 governmental changes
- After a close vote, Louis XVI is found guilty of treason and beheaded
- Guillotine—machine designed during the Revolution to behead people

The War Continues
- French army wins great victory against Prussians and Austrians
- In 1793 Britain, Spain, Holland join forces against France
- National Convention orders draft of 300,000 to reinforce army

The Terror Grips France
Divided Country
- Not all people in France support all changes of the Revolution

Robespierre Assumes Control
- Maximilien Robespierre—Jacobin leader rules France for a year
- Becomes leader of the Committee for Public Safety, a dictator
- Reign of Terror—Robespierre’s rule, which includes killing many opponents
- Thousands die during the Terror, including former allies and Marie Antoinette
- 85 percent of those who die during the Terror are middle or lower class

End of the Terror
Another Change in Government
- In July 1794, Robespierre arrested, executed
- Terror results in public opinion shifting away from radicals
- Moderate leaders write new constitution
- Two-house legislature and five-man Directory restore order
- New government makes Napoleon Bonaparte commander of armies

Napoleon Forges an Empire

Napoleon Seizes Power
Early Life
- Napoleon Bonaparte—born in Corsica, attends military school, joins army

Hero of the Hour
- In 1795, Napoleon defeats royalist rebels attacking National Convention
- Napoleon wins stunning victories in Italy, gaining popularity
- News of his defeats in Egypt is suppressed

Coup d’État
- In November 1799, he carries out coup d’état—seizure of power
- Napoleon defeats British, Russians, Austrians who join forces against him
Napoleon Rules France

Vote of Approval
• New constitution is approved through plebiscite—vote of the people

Restoring Order at Home
• To fix economy, he sets up national banking system, efficient tax collection
• Establishes lycées—government-run public schools to train officials
• Signs concordat—agreement—with pope restoring Catholicism in France
• Creates Napoleonic Code—uniform system of laws

Napoleon Crowned as Emperor
• In December 1804, Napoleon crowns himself emperor of France

Napoleon Creates an Empire

Loss of American Territories
• In 1801, Napoleon attempts to retake colony of Saint Domingue but fails
• Gives up on the Americas and concentrates on Europe
• Sells the Louisiana Territory to United States for $15 million in 1803

Conquering Europe
• Britain, Russia, Austria, Sweden join forces against Napoleon
• Napoleon crushes enemy forces in several brilliant battles
• Napoleon forces Austria, Russia, Sweden to sign peace treaties

The Battle of Trafalgar
• In 1805, British win Battle of Trafalgar—ensures British naval superiority
• This defeat forces Napoleon to give up plan of invading Britain
• Looks for another way to control Britain

The French Empire
• Napoleon controls Europe except for Britain, Portugal, Sweden, Ottomans
• Has puppet rulers in some countries, alliances with others
• French Empire reaches largest extent from 1807 to 1812

Napoleon’s Costly Mistakes

The Continental System
• Napoleon strikes Britain through blockade—forced closing of ports
• Continental System—economic plan to strengthen Europe, weaken Britain
• Smugglers and uncooperative allies make France’s blockade fail
• Britain responds with blockade of its own, led by its stronger navy
• Americans fight Britain in War of 1812; war does no major damage to Britain

Napoleon’s Empire Collapses

The Peninsular War
• Napoleon sends troops across Spain to attack Portugal, causing protest
• Napoleon makes his brother king of Spain, making things worse
• Spanish fight as guerrillas—small groups that attacked and then disappear
• British aid Spanish guerrillas
• Napoleon loses 300,000 soldiers during this Peninsular War
• Nationalist rebels fight the French in other conquered territories
The Invasion of Russia
- Relations with Russia break down, Napoleon decides to invade
- In June 1812, Napoleon’s army marches into Russia with 420,000 men
- Russians use scorched-earth policy—destroying crops, livestock
- In September 1812, Russians retreat from Moscow after Battle of Borodino
- Napoleon finds Moscow abandoned and burning
- Napoleon retreats, losing thousands of soldiers to raids, cold weather

Napoleon’s Costly Mistakes

Napoleon’s Downfall
- Britain, Prussia, Sweden, Russia, Austria join forces against Napoleon
- Napoleon raises another army, but meets quick defeat by allied powers
- Napoleon finally surrenders and is exiled to island of Elba

The Hundred Days
- Louis XVIII, new king, is soon overthrown and Napoleon returns from exile
- Waterloo—British, Prussian forces defeat Napoleon’s army
- This defeat ends Hundred Days—Napoleon’s last attempt at power

The Congress of Vienna
After exiling Napoleon, European leaders at the Congress of Vienna try to restore order and reestablish peace.

Metternich’s Plan for Europe

A Meeting of Nations
- Congress of Vienna—series of meetings that reshape Europe

Metternich and the Great Powers
- Klemens von Metternich—foreign minister of Austria, influential at Congress
- Balance of power—a chief Metternich goal, with no one country a threat

Legitimacy
- Legitimacy—monarchs deposed by Napoleon are returned to thrones
- Leaders hope to restore order through these changes
- Congress of Vienna succeeds in getting all European governments together
- Fair deals are worked out so that the meeting does not lead to more war
- European nations agree to preserve peace, which lasts almost 40 years

The Congress of Vienna

Balance of Power
- European powers weaken France but leave it mostly intact

Metternich’s Plan for Europe

The Containment of France
- Kingdom of the Netherlands formed, and Switzerland made independent
- Austria dominates new German Confederation of 39 German states
- Kingdom of Sardinia is strengthened by adding Genoa

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Metternich’s Plan for Europe

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Political Changes Beyond Vienna

Conservative Europe
- Holy Alliance—Russia, Prussia, Austria pledge to fight revolution
- Concert of Europe—European nations pledge to help fight revolutions
- Conservative governments rule across Europe, but new ideas have impact

Revolutions in Latin America
- Napoleon's replacing king of Spain set off rebellions in Spanish America
- Many former colonies of Spain and Portugal gain independence

Long-Term Legacy
- Britain, Prussia gain power; spreading nationalism leads to revolutions

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