

Standard 10.2.4 Explain how the ideology of the French Revolution led France to develop from constitutional monarchy to democratic despotism to the Napoleonic empire.



Maximilien Robespierre

"Terror is nothing other than justice, prompt, severe, inflexible"

After the death of Louis XVI in 1793, the Reign of Terror began. The first victim was Marie Antoinette. She had been imprisoned with her children after she was separated from Louis. First they took her son Louis Charles from her (often called the lost dauphin, or Louis XVII). He disappeared under suspicious circumstances. Then she led off a parade of prominent and not-so-prominent citizens to their deaths. The guillotine, the new instrument of egalitarian justice, was put to work. Public executions were considered educational. Women were encouraged to sit and knit during trials and executions. The Revolutionary Tribunal ordered the execution of 2,400 people in Paris by July 1794. Across France 30,000 people lost their lives.

The Terror was designed to fight the enemies of the revolution, to prevent counter-revolution from gaining ground. Most of the people rounded up were not aristocrats, but ordinary people. A man (and his family) might go to the guillotine for saying something critical of the revolutionary government. If an informer happened to overhear, that was all the tribunal needed. Watch Committees around the nation were encouraged to arrest "suspected persons, ... those who, either by their conduct or their relationships, by their remarks or by their writing, are shown to be partisans of tyranny and federalism and enemies of liberty" (Law of Suspects, 1793). Civil liberties were suspended. The Convention ordered that "if material or moral proof exists, independently of the evidence of witnesses, the latter will not be heard, unless this formality should appear necessary, either to discover accomplices or for other important reasons concerning the public interest." The promises of the Declaration of the Rights of Man were forgotten. Terror was the order of the day. In the words of Maximilien Robespierre, "Softness to traitors will destroy us all."

Robespierre was the mastermind of the Reign of Terror. He was the leader of the Committee of Public Safety, the executive committee of the National Convention, and the most powerful man in France. He explained how terror would lead to the Republic of Virtue in a speech to the National Convention:

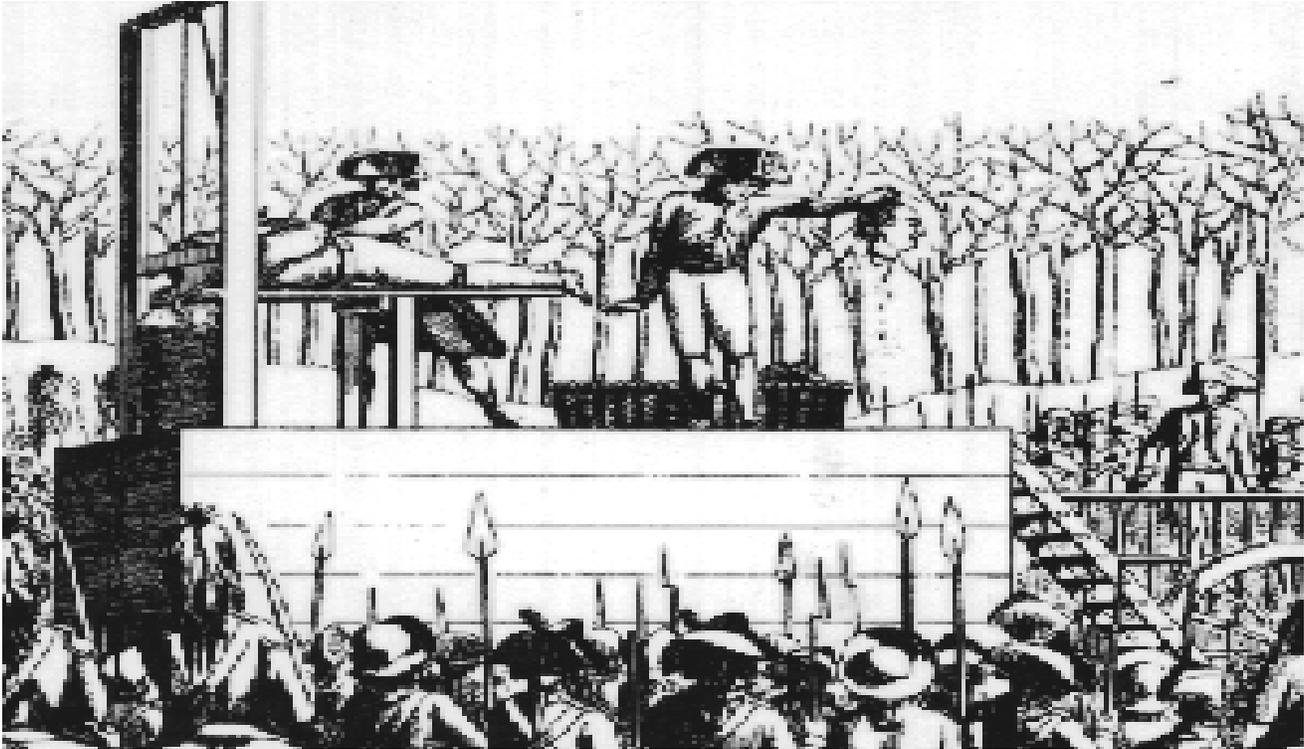
If the spring of popular government in time of peace is virtue, the springs of popular government in revolution are at once *virtue and terror*: virtue, without which terror is fatal; terror, without which virtue is powerless. Terror is nothing other than justice, prompt, severe, inflexible...It has been said that terror is the principle of despotic government. Does your government therefore resemble despotism? Yes, as the sword that gleams in the hands of the heroes of liberty resembles that with which the henchmen of tyranny are armed. Maximilien Robespierre
Speech on the Justification of the Use of Terror

The old maxim "the end justifies the means" describes Robespierre's policy well.

Even the radical Jacobins, the supporters of Robespierre, come to feel that the Terror must be stopped. Danton rose in the Convention calling for an end to the Terror. He was its next victim. Fearful of Danton's reputation for eloquence, the Convention passed a decree stating that any accused person who insulted the court should be prohibited from speaking in his own defense. Danton was not allowed to speak in his own defense. Nevertheless after the trial Danton asserted that "the people will tear my enemies to pieces within 3 months." As he was led to the guillotine he remarked "Above all, don't forget to show my head to the people - it's well worth having a look at." Modesty was never one of his virtues.

When Robespierre called for a new purge in 1794, he seemed to threaten the other members of the Committee of Public Safety. The Jacobins had had enough. Cambon rose in the Convention and said "It is time to tell the whole truth. One man alone is paralyzing the will of the Convention. *And that man is Robespierre.*" Others quickly rallied to his support. Robespierre was arrested and sent to the guillotine the next day, the last victim of the Reign of Terror.

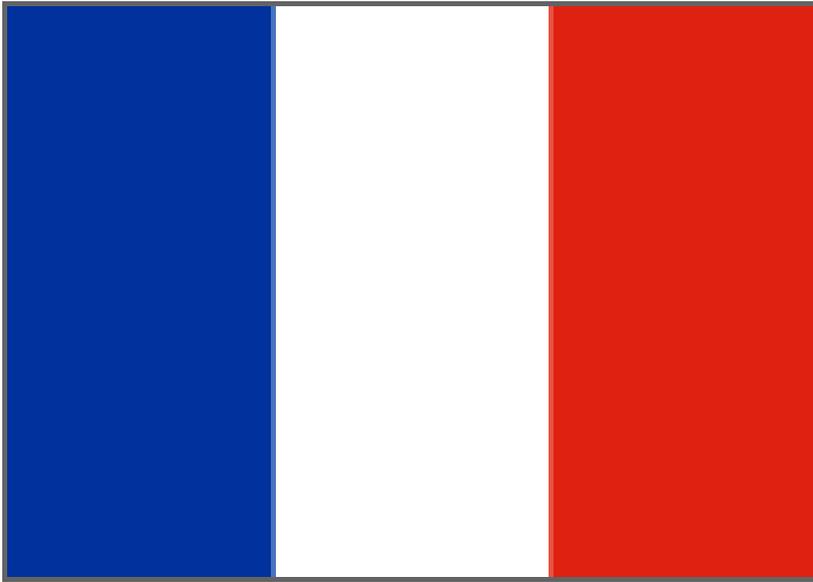
The Death of Louis XVI



"I forgive those who are guilty of my death"

The constitutional monarchy put in place by moderate revolutionaries such as the Marquis de Lafayette had fallen by 1792, giving way to a radical republic. The National Convention decided to put Louis on trial for his crimes. Although his guilt was never an issue, there was a real debate in the Convention on whether the king should be killed. They voted for his execution. On January 23, 1793 Louis Capet went to the guillotine in the Place de la Concorde, where a statue of his predecessor, Louis XV, once stood. At the scaffold he said "I forgive those who are guilty of my death."

The Gospel of the Revolution



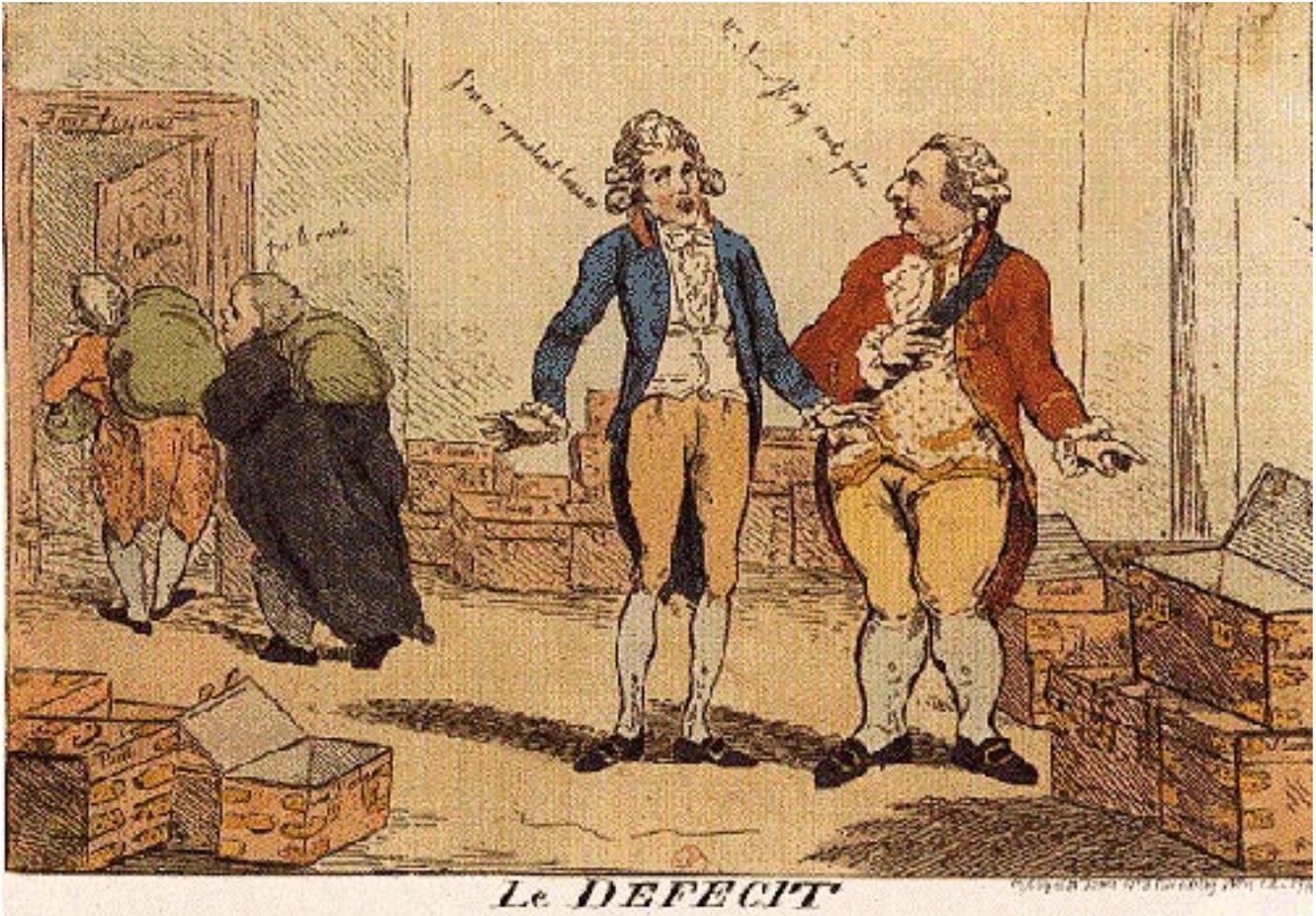
Marquis de Lafayette, commander of the new National Guard, combined the colors of the King (white) and the colors of Paris (blue and red) for his guardsmen's uniforms and from this came the Tricolor, the new French flag.

"Come children of the Motherland, the day of glory has arrived! Against us, the tyrant has raised his bloody banner, has raised his bloody banner! Don't you hear across our countryside the roar of his merciless soldiers? They are coming right into your arms to butcher your friends and family! Citizens, to arms! Let's march! March! So that our very fields shall wash with their evil blood!"

The Marseillaise First a French marching song, and later the National Anthem.

The French Revolution took on the character of a religious crusade. It was not enough to have a revolution at home. The gospel of revolution must be spread to the rest of Europe. France declared war on Prussia and Austria as the French "nation" against foreign kings, and proclaimed it advanced the cause of liberty.

The Financial Crisis

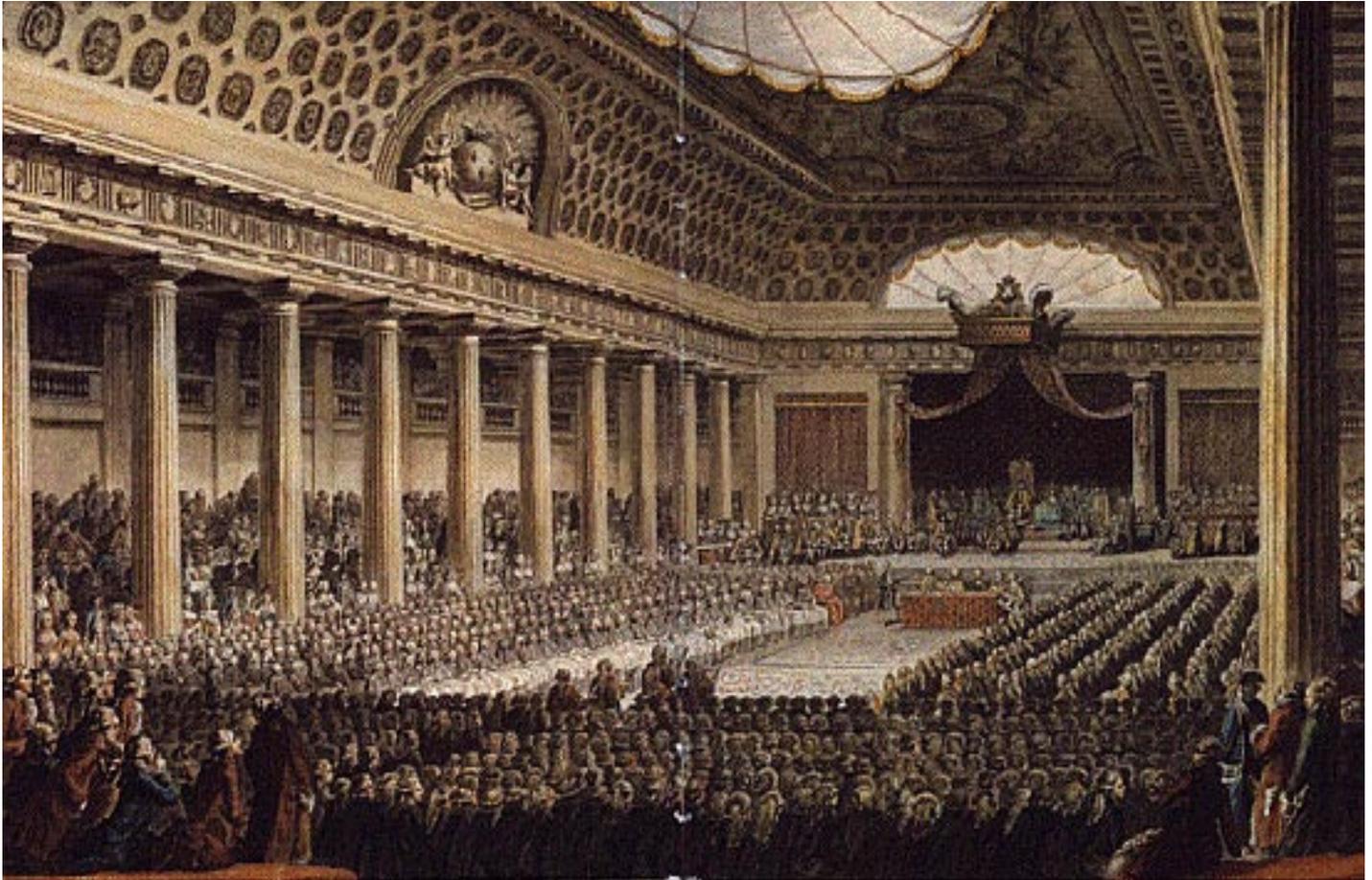


In this cartoon from the time, Louis is looking at the chests and asks "where is the tax money?" The financial minister, Necker, looks on and says "the money was there last time I looked." The nobles and clergy are sneaking out the door carrying sacks of money, saying "We have it."

While the King and Queen of France lived in luxury and splendor at the magnificent Palace of Versailles outside of Paris, the government of France, was bankrupt and was facing a serious financial crisis.

The crisis came about primarily because of an inefficient and unfair tax structure, outdated medieval bureaucratic institutions, and a drained treasury which was the result of aiding the Americans during the American Revolution, long wars with England, overspending, and an inequitable tax system which placed the burden of taxation on those least able to pay, the Third Estate.

The Meeting of the Estates General

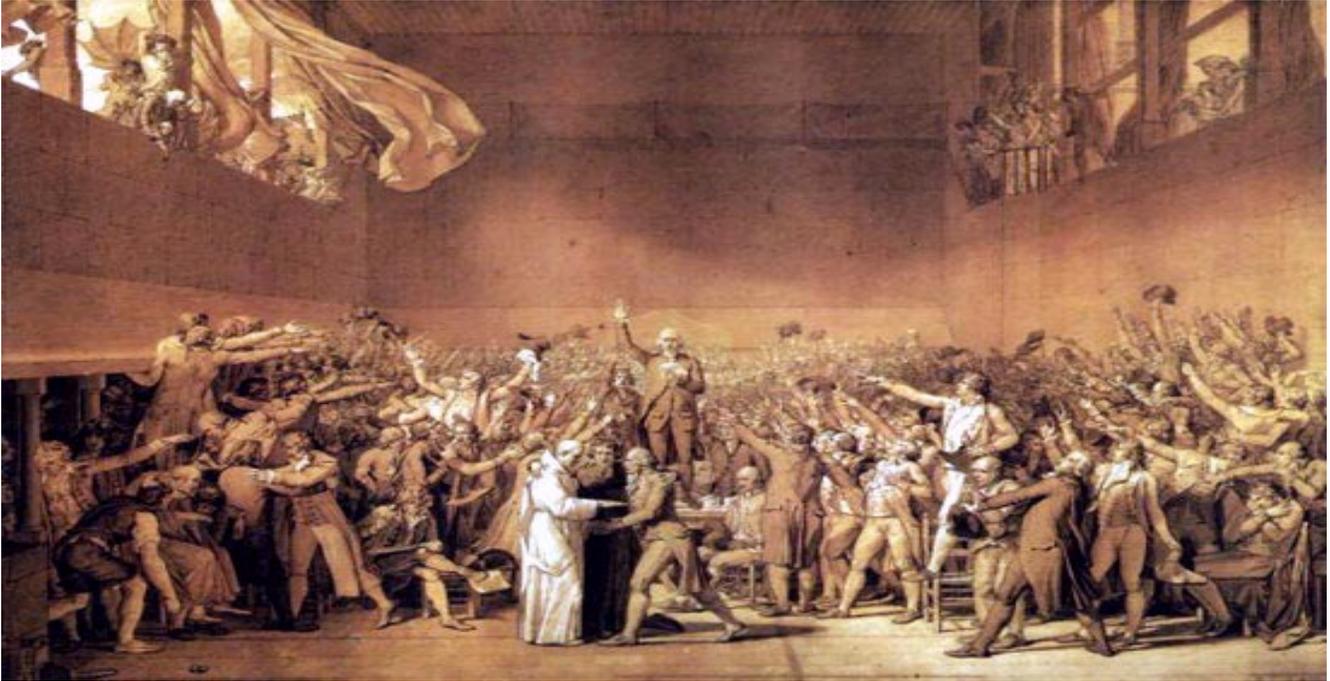


The meeting of the Estates General May 5, 1789

When the Estates General met, each estate solemnly marched into the hall at Versailles. The third estate, dressed all in black, the nobility dressed in all their finery and finally the clergy dressed in full regalia.

The delegates of the third estate insisted that the three orders meet together and that the vote be taken by head, rather than by order. (Since there were far more delegates from the third estate, this plan would give them a majority). The King refused to grant their request. The third estate refused to budge.

The Tennis Court Oath



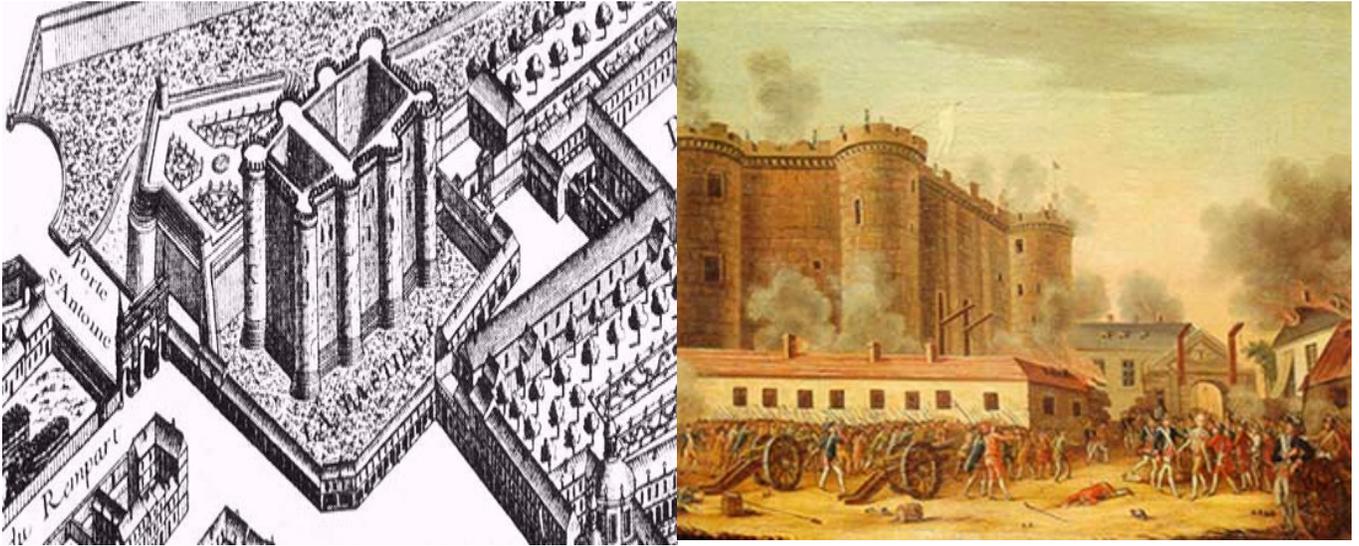
"The National Assembly, considering that it has been summoned to establish the constitution of the kingdom. . . decrees that all members of this assembly shall immediately take a solemn oath not to separate. . . until the constitution of the kingdom is established on firm foundations. . ."

June 20, 1789

The King had declared the activities of the Third Estate illegal and refused to recognize the "National Assembly." Meeting in defiance at an indoor tennis court at Versailles, the Third Estate swore not to separate until a constitution had been written for France. Only one delegate dissented. Their oath is known as the Tennis Court Oath.

Hearing of the oath, the King called a meeting of all three orders. At the end of the meeting he ordered the Third Estate to disperse. They refused. One of the delegates declared that "We are here at the will of the people, . . . and . . . shall not stir from our seats unless forced to do so by bayonets." The King was unwilling to use force and eventually ordered the first and second estates to join the new National Assembly. The Third Estate had won.

The Bastille



The Revolution, set in motion by the nobility, and truly started by the bourgeoisie, now spread to the common people.

Conditions were poor in Paris for the common people. The price of bread was high and supplies short due to harvest failures. Rumors spread that the King and Queen were responsible for the shortages. Then French troops marched to the capital. Rumors spread quickly among the already restless mobs that the King was intending to use them against the people. The dismissal of the Finance Minister Necker, who was popular with the Third Estate, ignited the spark.

Mobs roamed in search of weapons. Although some muskets were found when they broke into a public hospital for wounded soldiers, there was no ammunition. The ammunition was stored in the Bastille.

On July 14, 1789, the mob, joined by some of the King's soldiers, stormed the Bastille. The commander, de Launay, attempted to surrender, but the mob would not accept it. He was killed as they poured through the gates. No guard was left alive.

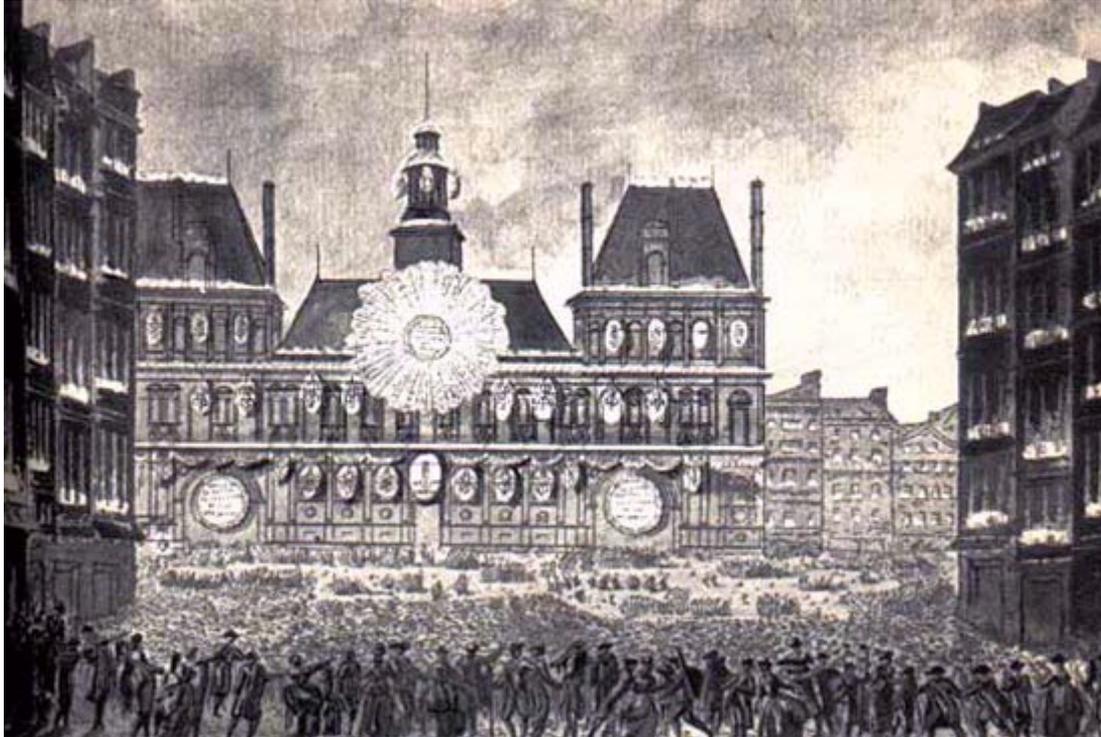
Later in the day the prisoners were released. There were only seven: two were convicted forgers; one was a loose-living aristocrat put in prison by his own father. Nevertheless it was a great symbolic event, one which is still celebrated in France every year.

Women's March to Versailles



On October 4, 1789, a crowd of women demanding bread for their families gathered other discontented Parisians, including some men, and marched toward Versailles, arriving soaking wet from the rain. They demanded to see "the Baker," "the Baker's wife," and "the Baker's boy". The King agreed to meet with some of the women and promised to distribute all the bread in Versailles to the crowd. The arrival of the National Guard on the scene determined to take the King back to Paris complicated things for the King. Some of the crowd got into the Queen's quarters and Marie Antoinette barely escaped by way of a secret passage (still partly intact at the Palace at Versailles) to the King's room. He agreed to address the people from his balcony. "My friends," he said, "I will go to Paris with my wife and my children." It was a fatal mistake. It was the last time the King saw Versailles.

The Constitution of 1791



On the day of the Tennis Court Oath, the National Assembly had declared that it would not disband until a new constitution had been created for France. They completed their task in 1791. The new constitution created by these moderate revolutionaries declared France to be a constitutional monarchy. Within this new government, all legislative powers went to a single Legislative Assembly, which alone had the power to declare war and raise taxes.

The Legislative Assembly was an indirectly elected body. It was made up of representatives selected by Electors, who themselves were elected by "active" citizens. An active citizen was a male citizen who paid annual taxes equal to the local wages paid for three days of labor. About two thirds of the male citizens were able to vote. Only a small number qualified to serve as either electors or members of the Legislative Assembly.

The monarch had only limited powers. He could temporarily stop legislation with a *suspensive veto*, but he could not veto anything permanently. He had no control of the army, or any authority over local government. He had no voice in the new Legislative Assembly.

The constitution lasted only one year. Even as the constitution was created, the revolution was turning in a more radical direction.

Napoleon Bonaparte



People had grown tired of the instability and bloodshed of the revolution and were ready for something more moderate. By 1795, the republic was gone, and 5 men with business interests had the executive power in France. This new government was called The Directory and was far more conservative than the Jacobin republic had been. It was also ineffectual and the people readily accepted the coup d'etat of Napoleon Bonaparte in 1799. The revolution was over.

The government in the last phase of the French Revolution was known as The Directory. In 1799, 10 years after the beginning of the revolution, it ended. Because many prominent men, particularly Abbe Sieyes, felt that the Directory was failing, they invited the successful young General Napoleon to take power. He became part of a triumvirate, three consuls. The consulate had full power, and elections were ended. Napoleon assumed the position of First Consul and obtained near dictatorial powers.

The Consulate made government in France more efficient and abolished most of the remnants of class and privilege. He created a meritocracy, advancing men in public service according to their ability, not on their birth. The feudal system was dead.

Those who supported him and cooperated with him were rewarded. Those who he believed were a threat were ruthlessly eliminated.



By 1804 Napoleon had dictatorial power and was a monarch in all but name. He announced that he would be crowned emperor, and the people overwhelmingly voted in a plebiscite to support him. His power would now pass to his eldest son; he was Napoleon I.

In 1803, France was once again at war with Great Britain, and by 1805, Great Britain, Austria, Russia and Prussia had united to form the Third Coalition. Within two years Napoleon crushed the other European powers. With the defeat of the Third Coalition and the conclusion of the Treaty of

Tilsit with Alexander I of Russia, Napoleon controlled most of Western and even Central Europe (from Spain to the Grand Duchy of Warsaw, with the exception of the Habsburg lands).

From 1807 to 1812 Napoleon was the master of Europe. His territorial ambitions and military genius had defeated continental Europe. The countries were either part of the enlarged French Empire, dependant states with Napoleon's relatives on the throne, or allied states (countries which had been defeated by him). The only enemy was Great Britain.

Unable to defeat Britain at sea, he hoped to subdue the island nation with the Continental System, which cut Britain off from European trade. This hurt European nations too, though, and many did not strictly enforce the embargo. Russia finally refused to participate. The system failed to bring Britain to its knees.



By 1812 Napoleon felt he must invade Russia. When Russia abandoned the continental system it was just a matter of time before war. Napoleon was determined to get there first and so led a huge army of 600,000 into Russia.

Instead of giving battle, the Russians retreated, destroying everything that could be of use to the French. Napoleon had always lived off the land in his campaigns in order to forestall a supply problem. Now it was impossible. When he reached Moscow in September he found it burning. There was nothing there which could feed and house his troops for the winter. so he was forced to turn back toward home just as winter was setting in. His Grand Army ran out of supplies and soldiers died of disease and the bitter cold of the Russian winter. They were clad only in summer uniforms. Russian troops continually attacked them as they trudged home. Only 40,000 survived the march.

At this point, the anti-Napoleonic forces gathered together. Over the course of 1813 and early 1814, Great Britain, Russia, Prussia and Russia, as well as a host of other small countries, drove Napoleon's forces back to France. This was the turning point.

Though the Great Powers offered Napoleon the opportunity to surrender and remain Emperor of France (the Frankfurt Proposals), Napoleon refused. The invasion of Russia had proved his undoing.

On March 31, 1814, Paris fell, and days later Napoleon abdicated. He was imprisoned on the island of Elba, but the island could not keep him. He landed in France on March 1, 1815, while at the Congress of Vienna, the powers of Europe were dividing up the continent. The people still loved him, and he was welcomed in Paris. He took control of the government and army and again went to war. But the odds were against him. The Quadruple Alliance of Austria, Russia, Prussia and Great Britain defeated Napoleon at Waterloo. Napoleon's One-Hundred Days convinced the Great Powers to force France to submit to a stricter peace treaty, and to agree that no Bonaparte should ever again rule France. They exiled Napoleon to the island of St. Helena, where he died in 1821, apparently poisoned.

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Reign of Terror		
The Meeting of the Estates General		
Tennis Court Oaths		

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Women's March to Versailles		
Constitution of 1791		
Napoleon Bonaparte		
The Gospel of the Revolution		