



How the French Revolution Worked

BY HOWSTUFFWORKS.COM CONTRIBUTORS (HSW-CONTACT.HTM) CULTURE (HTTP://PEOPLE.HOWSTUFFWORKS.COM/CULTURE) | HISTORICAL EVENTS (HTTP://HISTORY.HOWSTUFFWORKS.COM/HISTORICAL-EVENTS)

Browse the article How the French Revolution Worked (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-events/french-revolution.htm>)



(<http://history.howstuffworks.com/european-history/french-revolution-pictures.htm>)

(<http://history.howstuffworks.com/european-history/french-revolution-pictures.htm>)

The guillotine became a symbol of terror in the French Revolution. See more pictures of the French Revolution.
HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES
([HTTP://WWW.GETTYIMAGES.COM](http://www.gettyimages.com))

Since the Middle Ages, **France** (<http://geography.howstuffworks.com/europe/geography-of-france.htm>) had been divided into a three-class system. The clergy made up the first class, the **nobility** (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-figures/royalty.htm>) made up the second and the peasantry the third. There was no room for social climbing: Kings gave birth to kings, paupers gave birth to paupers. For centuries, the **Old Regime** held all the power in France. The nobility and clergy represented only 3 percent of the French **population** (<http://people.howstuffworks.com/population.htm>), but their minds conceived of the policies that governed the entire country [source: **History Channel** (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-events/french-revolution10.htm>)]. This system was rigid and uncompromising, but no one paused to consider -- or dared to say -- that it was unfair.

By the 18th century, the **Enlightenment** (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-events/enlightenment.htm>) was dawning. Philosophers like Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau advocated for equality and reason. They asked why people put their faith in political and religious leaders who disregarded their needs. In **salons**, the wealthy members of Parisian society debated these issues. Their eyes were on the American colonies, where the Americans had gone to war to claim their rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. (Meanwhile, Thomas Jefferson, who'd described these principles in the **Declaration of Independence** (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-events>) had also declared that if France's queen **Marie Antoinette** (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-figures/top-5-marie-antoinette-scandals.htm>) had been shut up in a convent, France could have avoided the **revolution** (<http://news.discovery.com/revolutions/>) [source: **Smithsonian** (<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history-archaeology/marieantoinette.html>)].) While the French nobles pondered the unfairness of the universe, peasants went hungry in the streets of Paris and in the outlying provinces.

One of the medieval precedents that persisted in the 18th century was brutal execution. Criminals were burned, drowned, tortured and maimed -- all under the consenting eyes of the Old Regime. However, the French nobility were entitled to execution by decapitation. While it seems a particularly grisly way to die, decapitation is relatively swift and straightforward, a real gentleman's death. When Dr. Joseph Ignace Guillotin joined France's Constituent Assembly in 1789, he proposed that all capital criminals sentenced to death be decapitated [source: **Hibbert** (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-events/french-revolution10.htm>)]. Guillotin advocated for the creation of a decapitation device like the ones used in England, Germany, Italy and Scotland. The device was prototyped in Germany by the secretary of the Academy of Surgeons, who ensured that it was humane. By 1791, after a trial period during which the device sliced through countless cadavers, it was appointed France's national death-sentence machine. It was called the **guillotine**.

The guillotine was just a small part of an enlightened equal rights movement sweeping through France. While Guillotin advocated for equality in death, the French people were fighting for equality in life. And ironically enough, the guillotine would be misappropriated in this struggle. It became a tool of terrorism in the French Revolution as the undiscerning blade silenced nobles, radicals and ordinary citizens.

It's a question for the ages: What could turn a group of loyal subjects into a bloodthirsty mob? The movement that began as a reformation steadily devolved -- or evolved, depending on whom you ask -- into a full-fledged revolution. The French Revolution lasted for 10 years, from 1789 to 1799. But trouble began brewing in France years before dissident political factions went on witch hunts for counter-revolutionaries.

So did the **revolution** (<http://news.discovery.com/revolutions/>) actually accomplish anything it set out to? Was it just about brotherhood and bread or were there darker forces at work? The events of the French Revolution and the motley crew of characters responsible for them are as varied, complicated and painstakingly interwoven as a juicy soap opera plotline. We'll begin at the seat of power, in **Versailles** (<http://adventure.howstuffworks.com/palace-of-versailles-landmark.htm>).

Once Upon a Time at Versailles: Before the French Revolution



The Palace of Versailles was an opulent haven from the squalors of Paris.

ICONICA/GETTY IMAGES ([HTTP://WWW.GETTYIMAGES.COM/HOME.ASPX](http://www.gettyimages.com/home.aspx))

The Palace of Versailles (<http://adventure.howstuffworks.com/palace-of-versailles-landmark.htm>), in all its gilded architectural glory, was completed by 1682. **Louis XIV** (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-figures>) had taken it upon himself to relocate the French monarchy 12 miles (19 km) from the squalor of Paris.

If Louis XIV's reign had been distinguished by extravagance, **Louis XV** (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-figures>)'s was characterized by carelessness. Louis XV was a perfect example of the Old Regime's dysfunction. He preferred to satisfy his mistresses (notably Madame de Pompadour and **Madame du Barry** (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-figures>)) rather than his kingdom. But he did pull himself away from the boudoir long enough to get France into some serious financial scrapes. Under his reign, France was involved in the **War of Polish Succession** (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/>) (1733-38), the War of Austrian Succession (1740-48) and the **Seven Years' War** (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/>) (1756-63). France lost valuable land during these battles, and the Seven Years' War nearly drained the treasury.

At Versailles, it was easy to forget about the French people -- and also pretty convenient for a despised king like Louis XV. The people couldn't be ignored, though. For many years, diseases like **the plague** (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-events/black-death.htm>) had kept the peasant **population** (<http://people.howstuffworks.com/population.htm>) in check. Now, the population was booming and clamored for sustenance [source: **Doyle** (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-events/french-revolution10.htm>)].

When Louis XV died in 1774, the crown went to Louis Auguste, who famously intoned, "Protect us, Lord, for we are too young to reign." No one had much confidence in Louis XVI's ability to lead France, much less pull it out of debt. His young wife, **Marie Antoinette** (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-figures/top-5-marie-antoinette-scandals.htm>), only compounded his troubles. Marie Antoinette had been married off to Louis to cement the relationship between the Austrian Hapsburgs and the French **Bourbons** (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-figures>). They were teenagers when they wed, but already shy Louis and tentative Marie Antoinette were under pressure to create the next heir to the throne. The couple floundered in the bedroom for nearly seven years before producing a child -- and their first was a girl.



Young Marie Antoinette, blissfully oblivious to the fate that awaits her
IMAGNO/GETTY IMAGES
([HTTP://WWW.GETTYIMAGES.COM](http://www.gettyimages.com))

When she wasn't reproducing, Marie Antoinette was spending. Her reputation as Madame Deficit was well-deserved: She amused herself by ordering hundreds of gowns, trying out elaborate hairstyles and hosting lavish parties at her private retreat, Petit Trianon, on Versailles' expansive grounds. Marie Antoinette had a yearly wardrobe allowance of \$3.6 million, but she easily surpassed that by ordering dresses trimmed with silver and gold and dripping with precious jewels -- even **diamonds** (<http://science.howstuffworks.com/environmental/earth/geology/diamond.htm>) [source: **Thomas** (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-events/french-revolution10.htm>)]. Her focus was on pleasing the courtiers and her new family, and she may very well have been ignorant of the conditions in Paris. After a brief excursion to the city in 1773, she wrote to her mother, "What was really affecting was the tenderness and earnestness of the poor people, who, in spite of the taxes with which they are overwhelmed, were transported with joy at seeing us" [source: **Modern History Sourcebook** (<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1773marieantonette.html>)].

The third class was fully aware of its spendthrift queen, though. Pamphlets circulated with lewd cartoons of the queen at court orgies and with her eccentric stylist sweeping up her hair into impossibly high bouffants. It wasn't just her extravagance on display -- her lack of reproductive success was, too. Where was the male heir, the people wondered. Louis couldn't govern the bedroom; could he govern France?

Emasculated by this negative publicity and still smarting from criticisms at court, Louis exacted military vengeance. He pledged 2,000 million livres to the **American Revolutionary War** (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-events>); for that massive sum, he could've fed and sheltered 7 million of his own people for a year [source: **History Channel** (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-events/french-revolution10.htm>)]. This mistake wouldn't be his last, however. And the French would see to it that he was duly punished.

Estates General Resurrected



Maximilien Robespierre
PIERRE ROCH VIGNERON

Louis (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-figures>) was aware of his powerlessness. He exacted authority through financial initiatives, but these ill-advised policies only burdened the poor and pardoned the rich. His deregulation of grain may have been the very worst of these new policies. The cost of **bread** (<http://science.howstuffworks.com/innovation/edible-innovations/bread.htm>) increased more than tenfold in some instances, and the people could no longer afford the mainstay of their diet. Mobs lynched bakers and looted precious loaves from their shops. While the court of **Versailles** (<http://adventure.howstuffworks.com/palace-of-versailles-landmark.htm>) ate to excess, the people of **France** (<http://geography.howstuffworks.com/europe/geography-of-france.htm>) went hungry in the streets.

Royal advisers prodded Louis to elect a finance minister. Obliging, he appointed Jacques Necker in 1789. Necker was a pragmatic Enlightenment thinker who set out to reform government finances so that they'd serve the people. Necker's boldest move was calling a meeting of the **Estates General** (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/>), a legislative body made up of **deputies** (or representatives) from each of the three estates. The Estates General hadn't been assembled since 1614 [source: **Hibbert** (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-events/french-revolution10.htm>)].

Though 175 years had passed since its last meeting, not much had changed in the Estates General. Power still rested with the first and second estates the clergy and the nobility. The deputies' votes carried equal weight, but the first and second estate represented a sliver of a fraction of the French **population** (<http://people.howstuffworks.com/population.htm>). Because the first and second estate usually voted the same way on issues, the upper classes benefited from governmental policies while the third estate shouldered the burden of the wealthy.

The French wanted the justice of a three-chambered parliament to solve this imbalance (similar to how the American colonists rallied for no taxation without representation). The people began clamoring for identity. Pamphlets and newspapers flooded the streets of Paris as the people tried to define themselves in terms of class. In January 1789, theorist Emmanuel Joseph Sieyes put it like this: "hat is the Third Estate? Everything; but an everything shackled and oppressed. What would it be without the privileged order? Everything, but an everything free and flourishing. Nothing can succeed without it, everything would be infinitely better without the others" [source: **Modern History Sourcebook** (<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/sieyes.html>)].



An artist's depiction of the Tennis Court Oath, by which the French vowed to write a constitution for the people.
HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES ([HTTP://WWW.GETTYIMAGES.COM](http://www.gettyimages.com))

A lawyer named Maximilien Robespierre was less poetic than Sieyes, but he was an active, incendiary speaker. In early May of 1789, Robespierre went to Versailles to serve as a deputy at the Estates General. He was a true representative of the people; from the beginning, he incited unrest among the staid deputies when he proclaimed that all estates should pay **taxes** (<http://money.howstuffworks.com/personal-finance/personal-income-taxes/income-tax.htm>). Robespierre's perspective was guided by **Enlightenment** (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-events/enlightenment.htm>) logic, and it quickly gathered popularity as well as derisive ire.

Nearly two months of heated debate fueled the long-dormant Estates General, and the members of the third estate even won over some members of the clergy and nobility to their cause. But discussion was silenced on June 20, 1789, when members of the first and second estates bolted the doors of the Estates General shut. Undaunted, deputies found an unoccupied indoor tennis court and reconvened there. They identified themselves as the **National Assembly** and passionately swore to write a constitution for the people of France,

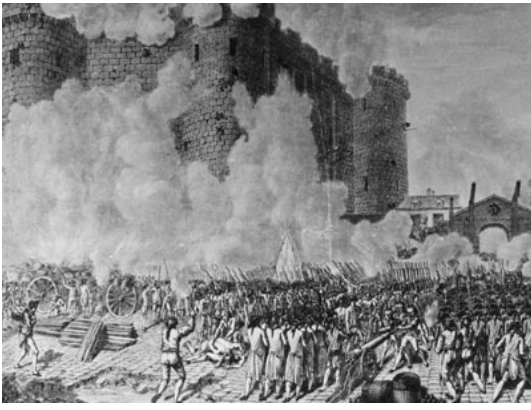
in what became known as the Tennis Court Oath.

During the early days of the National Assembly, there was a shred of hope that Louis might endorse this constitution. But when 30,000 of the king's troops were positioned around Paris, the people realized that reform wouldn't be won through politicians' promises and hopeful treaties [source: **History Channel** (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-events/french-revolution10.htm>)]. They responded by creating a homespun militia. The people broke into armories and swept the stores clean of firearms.

Then, Louis made the fateful decision to dismiss Necker from his position as minister of finance. The people viewed this as a direct retaliation to their cause. There was no mobilization of troops, no grand pronouncement of attack. On July 14, sheer chaos broke out in the streets of Paris, and the people headed for the **Bastille** (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/>).

The Bastille Falls and Louis Falters

The Bastille was an imposing relic of 14th-century warfare. In its prime, it was a medieval fortress; for centuries since, it had served as a **prison**



The chaos surrounding the fall of the Bastille resulted in bloody death and the desecration of the 14th-century fortress.
HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES (HTTP://WWW.GETTYIMAGES.COM)

(<http://people.howstuffworks.com/prison.htm>) and storehouse for gunpowder. But the Bastille was no ordinary prison: It quartered prisoners of the state who were convicted for crimes outside the realm of common law [source: [Hibbert](http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-events/french-revolution10.htm) (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-events/french-revolution10.htm>)]. The prison was shrouded in mystery, and legends abounded of the [torture](http://science.howstuffworks.com/legal-torture.htm) (<http://science.howstuffworks.com/legal-torture.htm>) incurred by the men who resided within its eight stoic towers. The Bastille was symbolic of the [monarchy](http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-figures/royalty.htm) (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-figures/royalty.htm>) in many ways -- it was a silent institution that answered to no one, yet doled out punishment as it saw fit.

On the morning of July 14, the mob that marched to the Bastille was out for gunpowder and revenge. The first order of business was getting past the guards -- a pretty simple feat when you're armed with all manner of blades. Then, the crowd dispersed within the fortress, setting loose prisoners and gathering gunpowder. Two symbols of the coming French Revolution were brandished that day: the [tricolour](http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-figures/royalty.htm) (the people's flag of red and blue divided by [Bourbon](http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-figures/royalty.htm)

(<http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-figures>) white) and heads of the massacred on pikes. The march on the Bastille proved how ruthless and determined the French people were about their fight for freedom. Even after the last guard was killed and the last prisoner set free, the people stayed behind to dismantle the prison. The Bastille didn't exactly fall; rather, it was decimated from the top down in a laborious process unaided by modern wrecking balls and [dynamite](http://science.howstuffworks.com/question397.htm) (<http://science.howstuffworks.com/question397.htm>).

At [Versailles](http://adventure.howstuffworks.com/palace-of-versailles-landmark.htm) (<http://adventure.howstuffworks.com/palace-of-versailles-landmark.htm>), Louis could scarcely believe the news, but the National Assembly took it in stride. It was a victory for the people, and bloodshed was natural in revolution, wasn't it? But this was an important turning point for France. There was no longer any possibility for reform -- the movement had organically become a revolution.

The National Assembly quickly drafted the [Declaration of the Rights of Man](http://history.howstuffworks.com/) (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/>), in which Louis was essentially written out of authority. All men were declared equal, the class system a distant memory of France's feudal past. Ever a man of the people, Maximilien Robespierre authorized freedom of the press so that information could quickly be disseminated to the streets of Paris.

Freedom of the press paved the way for irresponsible journalism, however. Jean Paul Marat and Jacques Rene Hebert, respective authors of *L'Ami du peuple* and *Le Pere Duchesne*, were reckless propagandists. In many ways, their [newspapers](http://people.howstuffworks.com/newspaper.htm) (<http://people.howstuffworks.com/newspaper.htm>) kept stride with the mounting tension, but they also stoked the fires of revolution. What Robespierre did for the Estates General and the National Assembly, Marat and Hebert did for the people of France. Their words excited the third estate, confirming in their minds that the revolution was a natural and just movement. But with increasingly vulgar language and paranoid indictments, the newspapers were less credible sources of information than they were death warrants for the clergy and nobility.

When Marat printed that the king and his courtiers had desecrated the tricolour at a recent party at Versailles, it unleashed another frenzy. Marat urged the people to take up arms and fight back -- and he pointed to the increasing number of Louis' troops around the city as evidence that the monarchy was preparing to wage its own retaliation against the revolution.

The Trouble with Traitors: French Revolution Events



When Parisian women marched to Versailles, they wanted two things: bread and Marie Antoinette's head. They triumphantly returned with flour and the entire royal family.
FRENCH SCHOOL/GETTY IMAGES
(HTTP://WWW.GETTYIMAGES.COM/HOME.ASPX)

On Oct. 5, 1789, an agitated assembly of women demanding [bread](http://science.howstuffworks.com/innovation/edible-innovations/bread.htm) (<http://science.howstuffworks.com/innovation/edible-innovations/bread.htm>) marched to [Versailles](http://adventure.howstuffworks.com/palace-of-versailles-landmark.htm) (<http://adventure.howstuffworks.com/palace-of-versailles-landmark.htm>). They surged effortlessly past the palace guards and thundered into the queen's bedroom mere minutes after she fled. The mob wanted the [royal family](http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-figures/royalty.htm) (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-figures/royalty.htm>) to come with them to Paris, and the ever-faltering [Louis](http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-figures) (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-figures>) at last acquiesced to the people's demands. With a heavy heart, he added his signature to the [Declaration of the Rights of Man](http://history.howstuffworks.com/) (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/>) and loaded his family into the royal carriage. As they rolled somberly alongside the crowd, the heads of their dead guards bobbed mockingly beside their windows.

But Louis wouldn't be content as puppet king for very long. Even though he was imprisoned by the people in the Tuileries Palace, he had allies beyond [France](http://geography.howstuffworks.com/europe/geography-of-france.htm) (<http://geography.howstuffworks.com/europe/geography-of-france.htm>)'s borders who

wanted to see him regain the throne.

As the events of the French Revolution slowly unfolded, the rest of the world had been watching guardedly from a distance. Britain and other European nations were delighted to watch the superpower implode, but they'd later be horrified at the escalating bloodiness of the revolution. Americans were a degree more sympathetic; France had largely funded their revolution. One difference between the nations was that the **United States** (<http://geography.howstuffworks.com/united-states/geography-of-united-states.htm>) had emerged as a **republic** (a government in which the power lies in the people's hands and popular vote decides the leaders), and France was still a **constitutional monarchy** (a limited monarchy in which the king or queen is limited in legislative powers).

As prisoner of the people in the Tuileries, Louis was surrounded by all the revolutionary action in Paris. The National Assembly had followed suit behind the king, shifting their headquarters from Versailles to Paris. The city was veritably bursting with the spirit of change. And for at least two years, the degenerating monarchy cooperated with the National Assembly. Louis signed the new government's legislative policies while Marie Antoinette looked on in disbelief.



The royal family was moved to the Tuileries Palace. Not too shabby for political prisoners.

IMAGNO/GETTY IMAGES ([HTTP://WWW.GETTYIMAGES.COM](http://www.gettyimages.com))

With her family members reigning as active monarchs in neighboring **Austria** (<http://geography.howstuffworks.com/europe/geography-of-austria.htm>), she saw no reason that Louis should relinquish control to bloodthirsty peasants. At last, she won her husband over. (For more on Marie Antoinette's perspectives, read **Top 5 Marie Antoinette Scandals** (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-figures/top-5-marie-antoinette-scandals.htm>.) They planned an escape and broke from the Tuileries on the night of June 21, 1791, under the guise of servants. The royal family was close to the Austrian border when its carriage was apprehended at the town of Varennes.

When Louis and his family were brought back to their quarters at the Tuileries, they were kept under heavier watch. At this point, even the king's sympathizers could no longer feel affection for the monarch -- in France's darkest hour, he'd scurried away like a **rat** (<http://animals.howstuffworks.com/mammals/rodents.htm>) in the night. The French people began to suspect that Marie Antoinette's connections in Austria might be planning to wage war against them, so under the booming recommendation of Jacques Pierre Brissot, the National Assembly declared war on both Austria and **Prussia**

(<http://history.howstuffworks.com/>) in April 1792.

Suspicious against the royal family continued to mount, including founded or unfounded beliefs that Marie Antoinette was writing to her family about confidential military maneuvers. In an act of misguided duty to the monarchies of Europe, Prussia's Duke of Brunswick wrote that he would raze Paris to the ground if the king were harmed. The Parisian press printed the letter for the whole city to see, and an enraged mob stormed the Tuileries. Louis was made to go on trial as an ordinary citizen, and he was quickly proclaimed guilty.

The matter of what to do with a dethroned traitor effectively split the National Assembly in two.

The National Convention: The Moderates, the Radicals and Those Who Refuse to Wear Breeches



The sans-culottes shunned breeches.

HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

The National Assembly was born out of shared interest in liberty, equality and brotherhood, but as the French Revolution wore on, differences in political ideologies became more obvious. Essentially, the assembly -- known from Sept. 20, 1792, on as the **National Convention** -- split into two major factions: the moderate **Girondins** (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/>) and the radical **Jacobins** (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/>) (the most prominent of whom was Robespierre). On the city streets of **Paris** (<http://geography.howstuffworks.com/europe/geography-of-paris.htm>), another political faction was gaining steam. The **sans-culottes**, or "those without breeches," became the leaders of local government while the convention governed the entire nation of **France** (<http://geography.howstuffworks.com/europe/geography-of-france.htm>). These localized rebels were typically artisans who identified themselves by wearing full-length pants rather than the knee-length breeches that the style of the Old Regime had dictated.

On Sept. 21, 1792, the Convention officially declared France a republic [source: **Encarta** (http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761557826_4/French_Revolution.html#s58)].

To cut ties completely with the Old Regime, the Convention even created a new Republican calendar for France. All

references to religion found in the old calendar's name were stricken, and the advent of a 10-day week was intended to make French **citoyens** (citizens) forget about Sunday, the proverbial day of worship and rest.

One of the first major issues to divide the Convention was the trial of **Louis XVI** (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-figures>), now known by the egalitarian surname Capet. Louis Capet had no allies in the Convention, but the Girondins at least wanted to spare his life. The Jacobins wouldn't hear of it; Louis must die. Robespierre convinced the people that the monarch must die for the republic to live. Louis ominously prophesied, "I trust that my death will be for the happiness of my people, but I grieve for France..." On Jan. 20, 1793, he was guillotined.



Louis Capet appears before the National Convention to await his verdict. It would be a glum one: He was sentenced to be guillotined.

HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES (HTTP://WWW.GETTYIMAGES.COM)

Louis' death didn't put to rest any controversies within the Convention, though. The poorly waged French Revolutionary Wars against Austria and Prussia only divided the factions further. While the wars began in an effort to protect France's borders from other European monarchies who would seek to restore Louis to the throne, they'd become an ideological mission of spreading revolutionary fervor through Europe.

The Jacobins were split on the matter of war. Georges Danton and Robespierre, once political allies, refused to see eye to eye. Danton was a rotund, convivial man with jarring opinions and a loud voice. His priority was the battlefield while Robespierre concerned himself with more immediate threats in the city of Paris. The threat of foreign troops encroaching on French soil finally convinced the Convention to send revolutionary militia to the outskirts of France, and the city of Paris thereby became devoid of protection.

Marat stepped in again to rally the people to action. This time, the Jacobin journalist's directive was straightforward: Kill all the political prisoners. He feared that with the **population** (<http://people.howstuffworks.com/population.htm>) of Paris outnumbered by the imprisoned counter-revolutionaries, the revolution would be squelched. The sans-

culottes rose to the occasion and wiped out thousands of prisoners -- men and women, aristocrats and clergy -- in just a few days. The bloodbath became known as the **September Massacre**.

The massacre brought Europe's critical gaze zeroing in on France. Was this still a revolution for democracy, or was it just gratuitous bloodshed? The French reconsidered their stance, too. In the outlying provinces, the rural French people were outraged by urban violence. Robespierre decided that someone would have to govern the frenzied French. And for a time, Robespierre, known by his contemporaries as the "Incorruptible," was a steady and righteous leader. But even he lost his cool in the subsequent years.

There Will Be (More) Blood: French Revolution Violence



An artist's depiction of Marat's murder. Marat would become a martyr for the French Revolution.

JOSEPH ROQUES/GETTY IMAGES (HTTP://WWW.GETTYIMAGES.COM/HOME.ASPX)

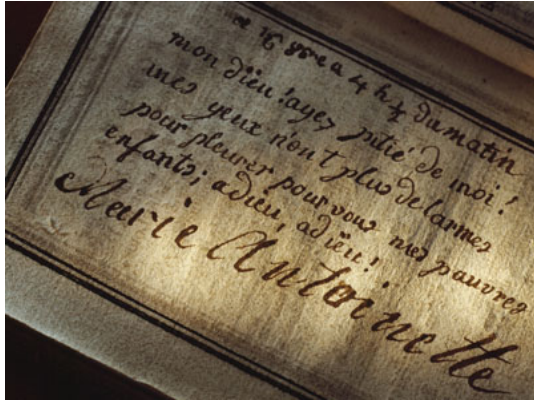
One of the most fascinating and haunting aspects of the French Revolution is that no one was spared from its gory violence. There was no effort to shield **women** (<http://people.howstuffworks.com/women.htm>) and children's **eyes** (<http://health.howstuffworks.com/mental-health/human-nature/perception/eye.htm>) from the heads that lolled at the base of the guillotine. Dainty aristocrats became hardened from years languishing in dank **prisons** (<http://people.howstuffworks.com/prison.htm>). A man who'd been your political ally and friend on Tuesday could very well turn you in for counter-revolutionary plotting on Wednesday. In Paris, the steady thud of the guillotine's blade meeting flesh and bone became **white noise** (<http://science.howstuffworks.com/question47.htm>) to city inhabitants. People generally accepted that they were beholden to the greater cause of the revolution, and that common goal made the conditions more tolerable.

While city-dwellers may very well have been desensitized to the violence of the revolution, the provincial people of **France** (<http://geography.howstuffworks.com/europe/geography-of-france.htm>) were deeply

disturbed by it. In the provinces, counter-revolutionary uprisings were more frequent, but the Republic put them down by mass executions. People were bound together and made to face firing squads, and their bodies were weighted and tossed off boats in open water [source: **History Channel** (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-events/french-revolution10.htm>)]. Moderate members of the National Convention began to suspect that civil war may very well break out in France before the revolutionary wars with Austria and Prussia could be won.

An unsuspecting figure from the provinces arrived in Paris in mid-July, 1793: Charlotte Corday. She tried twice to arrange a meeting with Jean Paul

Marat, under the premise that she had information about counter-revolutionary activity in the province of Caen. Corday was convinced that Marat was the chief agitator of the revolution, and she thought that if he were dead, peace would be restored in France. He refused to see her, and she finally forced her way into his apartment, where he lay soaking in a medicinal bath. With a modest dinner knife, she stabbed Marat in the chest, instantly killing him [source: [Hibbert \(http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-events/french-revolution10.htm\)](http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-events/french-revolution10.htm)]. She was seized, put on trial and guillotined. Had Charlotte Corday lived to see the fallout from Marat's death, she'd doubtlessly have been heartbroken. She couldn't have foreseen it, but the man who was a riotous journalist in his life became a martyr in his death.



Marie Antoinette's last inscription in her prayer book, which reads, "My God, have pity on me! My eyes have no more tears to cry for you my poor children; adieu! adieu!"

JAMES L. STANFIELD/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC/GETTY IMAGES
([HTTP://WWW.GETTYIMAGES.COM](http://www.gettyimages.com))

Months later, another major figure of the Revolution was put to death: [Marie Antoinette \(http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-figures/top-5-marie-antoinette-scandals.htm\)](http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-figures/top-5-marie-antoinette-scandals.htm). She'd been put to trial under charges of treason and other counter-revolutionary activity. One of the most shocking charges was molestation of her son. While Marie Antoinette had borne the weight of the other indictments, she couldn't bear this one. It was false, she decried, and she begged all other mothers present to reconsider the implication of such a statement. For a moment, the former queen had her sympathizers, but the people's bitter hate outweighed the poignancy of her plea. On Oct. 16, 1793, a cart delivered her to the guillotine. Marie Antoinette was the last queen of France, and she had left a legacy of wasteful extravagance in the midst of starvation.

The machinery of the revolution growled for more victims to feed the cause. Who would be sacrificed next?

The Reign of Terror



On his way to the guillotine, Danton supposedly said, "My only regret is that I am going before that rat Robespierre."

HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES
([HTTP://WWW.GETTYIMAGES.COM](http://www.gettyimages.com))

In 1793, the divisiveness in the Convention was even more apparent. The fledgling government was overturned in the name of counter-revolutionary paranoia. Led by Robespierre and Danton, the [Jacobins \(http://history.howstuffworks.com/\)](http://history.howstuffworks.com/) arrested the remaining [Girondins \(http://history.howstuffworks.com/\)](http://history.howstuffworks.com/) in the Convention, claiming that they were supporting counter-revolutionary activities.

With the moderates out of the picture, the Jacobin leaders persuaded the Convention members to endorse the **Great Terror**, an initiative designed to purge [France \(http://geography.howstuffworks.com/europe/geography-of-france.htm\)](http://geography.howstuffworks.com/europe/geography-of-france.htm) of all counter-revolutionaries. France essentially became a police state, and Robespierre, who had disdained measures of violence and fought so hard for the implementation of the Republican constitution, condoned the execution of counter-revolutionaries. He also agreed to reverse -- temporarily, at least -- the rights guaranteed by the constitution as well as censor the press. While he'd encouraged sensational press under journalists like Marat and Hebert, Robespierre didn't want the kind of chaos that their fiery rhetoric inspired. He wanted to keep the city tightly controlled and bound to his directives.

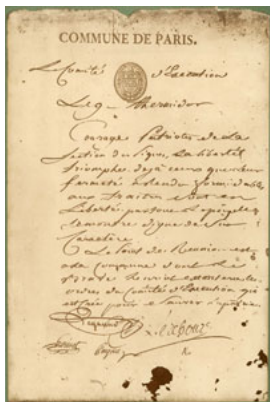
Two important organizations grew out of the Great Terror. The **revolutionary tribunal** was designed to try citizens who were suspected of counter-revolutionary activity. These offenses ran the gamut from idle gossip about the Convention to downright denouncement of the Convention -- or even as innocuous a charge as mistakenly addressing someone as monsieur or madame instead of citizen [source: [History Channel \(http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-events/french-revolution10.htm\)](http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-events/french-revolution10.htm)]. Any deed or word that went against the Republic was considered an act of treason. And with the looming threat of France's aristocratic emigres returning to the country to re-establish the [monarchy \(http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-figures/royalty.htm\)](http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-figures/royalty.htm), the Convention kept a close watch on citizens.

The other organization, the **Committee of Public Safety**, was an abbreviated assembly that governed France in its police state. Robespierre sat at the head of this committee and watched approvingly as the guillotine fell several times a day. Under this tightly controlled government, France at last gained traction in the wars along its borders, and the impromptu violence that reigned in the streets was restrained by Robespierre's [iron \(http://science.howstuffworks.com/iron.htm\)](http://science.howstuffworks.com/iron.htm) hand. There were no more chaotic massacres; Robespierre decided who lived and who died. He reasoned, "Terror is nothing other than justice, prompt, severe, inflexible; it is therefore an emanation of virtue" [source: [Modern History Sourcebook \(http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/robespierre-terror.html\)](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/robespierre-terror.html)].

As Robespierre's influence grew, Danton became rather uneasy. If the revolution continued along the path of death and destruction, its leaders would

be next. But when Danton spoke about the necessity of ending the revolution, he was sent to the tribunal for his counter-revolutionary rhetoric. He and his allies, the **Dantonists**, were guillotined. Danton prophesied that Robespierre would soon follow, and he was right -- but before he died, Robespierre unraveled a little more.

Robespierre on a Rampage: The Great Fear



A copy of Robespierre's last declaration to the people of France. It's stained with blood from his failed suicide attempt.

ROGER VIOLLET COLLECTION/GETTY IMAGES
(HTTP://WWW.GETTYIMAGES.COM)

Marat was dead, the **Girondists** (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/>) were dead and now Danton was dead. Robespierre was swiftly killing off his opponents, but he was also making enemies with his supporters. Those who survived the Great Terror feared that any misstep might sign their own death warrants. People obeyed Robespierre lest they be sent to the guillotine next. But by mid-1794, his long-silent detractors couldn't stay quiet much longer.

Robespierre's final ploy for wresting the counter-revolutionaries from **France** (<http://geography.howstuffworks.com/europe/geography-of-france.htm>) was the **Great Fear**. During this nationwide **witch** (<http://people.howstuffworks.com/witchcraft.htm>) hunt, Robespierre was responsible for nearly 800 executions a month [source: **History Channel** (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-events/french-revolution10.htm>)]. As if national **genocide** (<http://people.howstuffworks.com/darfur.htm>) weren't enough, Robespierre began isolating the people even further with his unexpected endorsement of a new religion.

The **Cult of the Supreme Being** was ostensibly something that Robespierre made up himself. The supreme being was, naturally, reason. Robespierre had long fantasized about a perfect republic in which people participated in government and heeded the universal guiding lights of reason and logic. But would the French people willingly worship this non-god? They'd been forcibly cut off from their Catholic roots -- Christianity had been purged from the nation in an effort to rid the people of their superstitions and faith in non-Republican entities. With the surviving French people becoming increasingly wary of their police state, they wondered: Was Robespierre power hungry or just plain mad?

Their answer seemed divinely delivered on June 6, 1794, the day Robespierre appointed as the Festival of the Supreme Being. In the center of Paris, a papier-mache replica of a **mountain** (<http://geography.howstuffworks.com/terms-and-associations/mountain.htm>) was constructed, and Robespierre appeared on top of it, clad in a toga [source: **History Channel** (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-events/french-revolution10.htm>)]. This seemed to clinch popular opinion that Robespierre was no longer a viable leader -- he'd been deluded into thinking that he was a god.

Robespierre sensed the people's change in attitude and retaliated by drafting a new list of public enemies who would be sent before the tribunal and executed. When he arrived at the Convention to deliver the list, he was seized and carried off with his allies to city hall. He was supposed to have been tried the very next day, but he couldn't bear the thought of the guillotine. Robespierre shot himself in a foiled suicide attempt. It was a poor shot -- he blew off his jaw and survived. When the Convention members came to collect him, they found Robespierre lying in agony and a few of his other allies dead. He was guillotined later that day.

But Robespierre's death didn't solve much. If anything, the latest Convention coup had only confused matters more. Floundering, the Convention deputies hastily created a new government. Under the **Directory**, a three-chambered system with two legislative bodies called the **Council of Ancients** and the **Council of Five Hundred**, there was a complex system of checks and balances. The Directory wanted to prove to the people that it was true to the ideals of the early people's republic (circa 1789) and not Robespierre's state of terror [source: **Doyle** (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-events/french-revolution10.htm>)]. In its efforts to toe the line between right and left, however, the Directory pleased no one.

The Directory and the War Hero

The Directory wasn't a real republic. Where, the people wondered, were the liberty, equality and brotherhood of the early reformation? For one, the members of the Directory weren't elected into position -- they were appointed by members within the organization. The people weren't getting a say, and they wouldn't until the first round of open elections. When those came around, it became apparent that the Directory was inching back toward **France** (<http://geography.howstuffworks.com/europe/geography-of-france.htm>)'s monarchical past. Only about 30,000 wealthy French men were eligible to vote.

There were complications with the new constitution, too. The Directory was walking a fine line, politically speaking, and it wanted to cater toward the growing number of royalists in France as well as the remaining **Jacobins**



Napoleon Bonaparte, the answer to France's monarchical and Republican woes.

HIPPOLYTE DELAROCHE/GETTY IMAGES

([HTTP://WWW.GETTYIMAGES.COM/HOME.ASPX](http://www.gettyimages.com/home.aspx))

(<http://history.howstuffworks.com/>) and sans-culottes who favored the Republic. The new constitution caused riots in the streets of **Paris** (<http://geography.howstuffworks.com/europe/geography-of-paris.htm>) on Oct. 5, 1795, and the military was called in to quell the uprising. One notable militiaman present at the scene was the French Revolutionary War hero **Napoleon Bonaparte** (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-figures>). (His military valor would become a major factor as France struggled to regain political identity, as we'll see soon.)

As conditions worsened in Paris, fingers pointed at the flippant Directory. It was trying so hard not to offend the opposing royalists and Republicans that it had neglected the people of France -- the very group for whom the constitution had originally been written. In 1795, one Parisian wrote, "Great God, what a Republic. And the worst of it is, one can't tell when or how it will end. Everybody is dying of hunger" [source: **Doyle** (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-events/french-revolution10.htm>)]. Popular opinion of the Republic continued to dwindle, and as the aristocratic **emigres** who'd left France to escape death returned home, it looked as though France was ready to re-embrace a monarchy. **Newspapers** (<http://people.howstuffworks.com/newspaper.htm>) and pamphlets that had once decried the king and queen now blasted the Directory. The Republic had failed.

At the borders, however, there was much to celebrate. France was at last wrangling victories out of the far-flung and poorly planned Revolutionary Wars. In **Italy** (<http://geography.howstuffworks.com/europe/geography-of-italy.htm>),

Napoleon Bonaparte's victories had been the talk of Europe -- and he'd even managed to establish a peace treaty with **Austria** (<http://geography.howstuffworks.com/europe/geography-of-austria.htm>). When the war hero returned home, a swift and decisive coup turned power from the Directory to him. Napoleon installed himself as the new leader of France, a fresh alternative for the people who thought that only a return to monarchical society would bring them "security" [source: **Doyle** (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-events/french-revolution10.htm>)]. He even reinstated the Church in France, which had been dechristianized under the revolution.

But there would be no happily-ever-after for France quite yet. In its fall from monarchy to police state, there was another bottom rung to hit: complete dictatorship.

To learn more about French history, bloody battles and royal scandal, explore the links on the next page.

Related HowStuffWorks Articles

- Top 5 Marie Antoinette Scandals (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-figures/top-5-marie-antoinette-scandals.htm>)
- How Royalty Works (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-figures/royalty.htm>)
- History of France (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/>)
- Geography of France (<http://geography.howstuffworks.com/europe/geography-of-france.htm>)
- Geography of Paris (<http://geography.howstuffworks.com/europe/geography-of-paris.htm>)
- Louis (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-figures>)
- Palace of Versailles (<http://adventure.howstuffworks.com/palace-of-versailles-landmark.htm>)
- Bastille (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/>)
- Girondists (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/>)
- Jacobins (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/>)
- Reign of Terror (<http://history.howstuffworks.com/>)
- How Blood Works (<http://health.howstuffworks.com/human-body/systems/circulatory/blood.htm>)
- What are smart mobs? (<http://people.howstuffworks.com/smart-mob.htm>)
- How Newspapers Work (<http://people.howstuffworks.com/newspaper.htm>)

More Great Links

- Marie Antoinette and the French Revolution on PBS (<http://www.pbs.org/marieantoinette/>)
- Authors and Texts of the French Revolution (<http://history.hanover.edu/modern/FRENCHRV.html>)
- Internet Modern History Sourcebook: French Revolution (<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/modsbook13.html>)

Sources

- Covington, Richard. "Marie Antoinette." *Smithsonian Magazine*. November 2006 (August 2008).<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/historyarchaeology/marieantoinette.html?c=y&page=1>
- Doyle, William. "The Oxford History of the French Revolution." Oxford University Press, New York: 1989.

- Fraser, Antonia. "Marie Antoinette: The Journey." Anchor Books, New York: 2001.
- "The French Revolution: A New Republic is Born in Blood." The History Channel. A&E Television Networks. DVD. 2005.
- Hibbert, Christopher. "The Days of the French Revolution." Perennial, New York: 1980.
- Kaiser, Thomas E. "French Revolution." MSN Encarta. 1997 (Aug. 27, 2008). http://encarta.msn.com/text_761557826____0/French_Revolution.html
- Modern History Sourcebook. "Marie Antoinette: Letter to Her Mother, 1773." November 1998 (Aug. 27, 2008). <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1773marieantoinette.html>
- Modern History Sourcebook. "Madam Campan: Memoirs of the Private Life of Marie Antoinette, 1818." Nov. 1998 (Aug. 27, 2008). <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1818marieantoinette.html>
- Modern History Sourcebook. "Maximilien Robespierre: The Cult of the Supreme Being." August 1997 (Aug. 27, 2008). <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/robespierre-supreme.html>
- Modern History Sourcebook. "Maximilien Robespierre: Justification of the Use of Terror." August 1997 (Aug. 27, 2008). <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/robespierre-terror.html>
- "The Oath of the Tennis Court (June 20, 1789)." The History Guide: Lectures on Modern European Intellectual History. 2001 (Aug. 27, 2008). http://www.historyguide.org/intellect/tennis_oath.html
- Philp, Mark. "Britain and the French Revolution." BBC History. July 4, 2002 (Aug. 27, 2008). http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/empire_seapower/british_french_rev.html
- Thomas, Dana. "Deluxe: How Luxury Lost Its Luster." Penguin Books, New York: 2007.
- Tocqueville, Alexis de. "The Old Regime and the French Revolution" Doubleday & Company, Inc., New York: 1955.
- "The United States and the French Revolution, 1789-1799." U.S. Department of State. (Aug. 27, 2008). <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/nr/88108.htm>