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## CHAPTERS IN BRIEF

# The French Revolution and Napoleon, 1789–1815

## Summary

**CHAPTER OVERVIEW** France's lower classes revolted against the king. Thousands died. Napoleon took control of France and created an empire. After his defeat, European leaders restored the rule of monarchs to the continent.

## 1 The French Revolution Begins

**KEY IDEA** Economic and social inequalities in the Old Regime helped cause the French Revolution.

In the 1700s, France was the leading country of Europe. It was the center of the new ideas of the Enlightenment. However, beneath the surface there were major problems causing unrest. Soon the nation would be torn by a violent revolution.

One problem was that people were not treated equally in French society. The French were divided into three classes, or estates. The First Estate consisted of the Roman Catholic clergy. The Second Estate was made up of rich nobles. Only about two percent of the people belonged to these two estates. Yet they owned 20 percent of the land and paid little or no taxes. They had easy lives.

Everybody else belonged to the Third Estate. This huge group included three types of people:

- the bourgeoisie—mostly well-off merchants and skilled workers who lacked the status of nobles
- city workers—cooks, servants, and others who were poorly paid and often out of work
- peasants—farm workers, making up more than 80 percent of the French people

Members of the Third Estate were angry. They had few rights. They paid up to half of their income in taxes, while the rich paid almost none.

Three factors led to revolution. First, the Enlightenment spread the idea that everyone should be equal. The powerless people in the Third Estate liked that. Second, the French economy was failing. High taxes kept profits low, and food supplies were short. The government owed money. Third, King Louis XVI was a weak, unconcerned leader. His wife, Marie Antoinette, was a big spender and was disliked.

In the 1780s, deeply in debt, France needed money. Louis tried to tax the nobles. Instead, they forced the king to call a meeting of delegates of the three estates to decide tax issues. The meeting began

in May 1789 with arguments over how to count votes. In the past, each estate had cast one vote. The top two estates always voted together and got their way. Now the Third Estate delegates wanted to change the system. The Third Estate had as many delegates as the other two estates combined. They wanted each delegate to have a vote. The king and the other estates did not agree to the plan.

The Third Estate then broke with the others and met separately. In June 1789, its delegates voted to rename themselves the National Assembly. They claimed to represent all the people. This was the beginning of representative government for France.

Louis tried to make peace. He ordered the clergy and nobles to join the National Assembly. However, trouble erupted. Rumors flew that Swiss soldiers paid by Louis were going to attack French citizens. On July 14, an angry crowd captured the Bastille, a Paris prison. The mob wanted to get gunpowder for their weapons in order to defend the city.

A wave of violence called the Great Fear swept the country. Peasants broke into and burned nobles' houses. They tore up documents that had forced them to pay fees to the nobles. Late in 1789, a mob of women marched from Paris to the king's palace at Versailles. They were angry about high bread prices and demanded that the king move to Paris. They hoped he would end hunger in the city. The king and queen left Versailles, never to return.

## 2 Revolution Brings Reform and Terror

**KEY IDEA** The revolutionary government of France made reforms but also used terror and violence to retain power.

In August 1789, the National Assembly took steps to change France. One new law ended all the special privileges that members of the First and Second Estates had enjoyed. Another law gave all French men equal rights. Though women did not get these rights, it was a bold step. Other laws cut the power of the Catholic Church. The government

took over church lands, hoping to sell them and raise money.

The new laws about the church divided people who had backed the Revolution. Catholic peasants remained loyal to the church. They were angry that the church would be part of the state. Thereafter, many of them opposed the Revolution's reforms.

For months the assembly worked on plans for a new government. During this time, Louis was fearful for his safety in France. One night he and his family tried to escape the country. They were caught, brought back to Paris, and lived under guard. After this, the king and queen were even less popular.

In the fall of 1791, the assembly drew up a new constitution that gave the king very little power. The assembly then handed over its power to a new assembly, the Legislative Assembly. After the new assembly began to meet, however, it divided into opposing groups. Some wanted an end to revolutionary changes. Others wanted even more radical changes.

At the same time, France faced serious trouble on its borders. Kings in other countries feared that the French Revolution would spread to their lands. They wanted to use force to restore control of France to Louis XVI. Soon France found itself at war—a war it quickly began to lose. Foreign soldiers were coming near to Paris. Many people thought that the king and queen were ready to help the enemy. Angry French citizens imprisoned them. Many nobles were killed in other mob action.

The government took strong steps to meet the danger from foreign troops. It took away the king's powers. In 1792, the National Convention—another new government—was formed. It declared Louis a common citizen and then put him to death. It also ordered thousands of French people into the army.

Soon one man, Maximilien Robespierre, began to lead France. He made many changes. He ordered the death of many people who did not agree with him. His rule, which began in 1793, was called the Reign of Terror. It ended in July 1794, when Robespierre himself was put to death.

France got a new, but less revolutionary, plan of government. Tired of the killing and unrest, the French people wanted a return to order.

## Ⓢ Napoleon Forges an Empire

**KEY IDEA** *Napoleon Bonaparte, a military genius, seized power in France and made himself emperor.*

**N**apoleon Bonaparte became the master of France. In 1795, he led soldiers against French royalists who were attacking the National Convention. For this, he was hailed as the savior of the French republic. Later he invaded Italy to end the threat from Austrian troops located there.

By 1799, the unsettled French government had lost the people's support. In a bold move, Napoleon used troops to seize control of the government. He then wielded complete power over the country. Other nations feared his power and attacked France again. Napoleon led his armies into battle. In 1802, the three nations fighting him agreed to a peace. Napoleon went back to solve problems at home.

He made several changes that were meant to build on the Revolution's good ideas:

1. He made tax collection more fair and orderly. As a result, the government could count on a steady supply of money.
2. He removed dishonest government workers.
3. He started new public schools for ordinary citizens.
4. He gave the church back some of its power.
5. He wrote a new set of laws that gave all French citizens the same rights. However, the new laws took away many individual rights won during the Revolution. For example, they limited free speech and restored slavery in French colonies.

Napoleon had hoped to make his empire larger in both Europe and the New World. In 1801, he had sent soldiers to retake the island of present-day Haiti. During a civil war, slaves on the island had seized power. But Napoleon had to give up on his plan. Too many of his soldiers died in battle or from disease. Napoleon eventually abandoned his New World plans. In 1803, he sold the largest part of France's North American land—the huge Louisiana Territory—to the United States.

Stopped in the Americas, Napoleon moved to add to his power in Europe. In 1804, he made himself emperor of France. He quickly captured country after country. Other nations joined against him. However, after Napoleon won a major battle in Austria in 1805, almost all of his European enemies agreed to a peace treaty. Napoleon's only loss during this time was to the British navy off the southwest coast of Spain. This loss prevented him from

invading and conquering Britain. That failure would be costly.

## ⊙ Napoleon's Empire Collapses

**KEY IDEA** *Napoleon's conquests aroused nationalistic feelings across Europe and contributed to his downfall.*

Napoleon loved power. He took steps to make his empire larger. However, these steps led to mistakes that brought about his downfall.

Napoleon's first mistake was caused by his desire to crush Britain. He wanted to hurt the British economy. So in 1806 he tried stopping all trade between Britain and the lands he controlled. The effort failed, for some Europeans secretly brought in British goods. At the same time, the British put their own blockade around Europe. Because their navy was so strong, it worked very well. Soon the French economy, along with others, began to grow weak.

Napoleon's second mistake was to make his brother king of Spain in 1808. The Spanish people were loyal to their own king. With help from Britain, they fought back against Napoleon for five years. Napoleon lost 300,000 troops.

Napoleon's third mistake was perhaps his worst. In 1812, he tried to conquer Russia, far to the east. He entered Russia with more than 400,000 soldiers. He got as far as Moscow, which was deserted and on fire. His soldiers found no food or supplies there. Winter was coming, and Napoleon ordered them to head back to France. As the soldiers marched west, bitter cold, hunger, and attacks by Russian troops killed thousands. Thousands more deserted. By the time the army exited Russian territory, only 10,000 of its men were able to fight.

Other leaders saw that Napoleon was weaker now, and they moved to attack. He was defeated in Germany in 1813. In 1814, Napoleon gave up his throne and was sent away. Nevertheless, in March 1815, he boldly returned to France. He took power and raised another army. By June, though, Napoleon had lost his final battle near a Belgian town called Waterloo. This time he was sent to a far-off island in the southern Atlantic Ocean. He died there in 1821.

## ⊙ The Congress of Vienna

**KEY IDEA** *After exiling Napoleon, European leaders at the Congress of Vienna tried to restore order and reestablish peace.*

After Napoleon's first defeat, in 1814, leaders of many nations met for months. They tried to draw up a peace plan for Europe that would last many years. They called the meeting the Congress of Vienna. The key person there was the foreign minister of Austria, Klemens von Metternich. He shaped the peace conditions that were accepted.

Metternich insisted on three goals. First, he wanted to make sure that the French would not attack another country again. Second, he wanted a balance of power in which no one nation was too strong. Third, he wanted to put kings back in charge of the countries from which they had been removed. The leaders agreed with Metternich's ideas. An age of European peace began.

Across Europe, kings and princes reclaimed their thrones. Most of them were conservatives and did not encourage individual liberties. They did not want any calls for equal rights. However, many people still believed in the ideals of the French Revolution. They thought that all people should be equal and share in power. Later they would fight for these rights again.

People in the Americas also felt the desire for freedom. Spanish colonies in the Americas revolted against the restored Spanish king. Many nations won independence from Spain. National feeling grew in many places in Europe, too. Soon people in areas such as Italy, Germany, and Greece would rebel and form new countries. The French Revolution had changed the politics of Europe and beyond.

## Review

1. **Analyzing Causes** What factors led to the French Revolution?
2. **Following Chronological Order** Trace the fate of Louis XVI during the Revolution.
3. **Summarizing** What did Napoleon do to restore order in France?
4. **Making Inferences** Why did Napoleon's empire collapse?
5. **Determining Main Ideas** What were the goals of the Congress of Vienna?