

French Revolution, 1789–99

This timeline charts the dramatic and bloody course of a much-debated period in French history

Debating the Revolution

Historians have hotly debated the causes of the French Revolution and why it changed course dramatically. What began as a moderate liberal approach which introduced civil rights and political representation became an extremist regime engaging in war, a reign of terror and the formation of a security state.

The majority of victims of the Terror were not noble elites but ordinary peasants who had taken up arms against the revolution. Apart from Paris, most executions took place in areas of civil war such as the Vendée, Lyons, Marseilles and border areas. The total number of death sentences in Paris was 2,639 and the total throughout the country including Paris was 16,594. But many more people died in prison awaiting trial or as a result of the conflicts. Historians have clashed over the number of victims. Recent research suggests perhaps half a million deaths in the civil war.

1789
Louis XVI announces elections for delegates to the Estates-General (Parliament) but there are disputes between nobility, clergy and third estate (the people). 17 June: A new National Assembly is formed, and belatedly recognised by Louis. 14 July: Tensions between Parisian crowds and the military lead to the storming of the Bastille prison. A number of nobles leave France forming the first wave of *émigrés*. 27 Aug: The Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen is adopted.

1791
20–25 June: French royal family flee Paris but are recognised at Varennes and returned to Paris. Frederick William II of Prussia and Leopold II of Austria assert a desire to strengthen the French monarchy (viewed as a threat by European powers to intervene in the revolution). 30 Sept: National Constituent Assembly replaced by Legislative Assembly (1 Oct).

1793
Louis XVI found guilty of conspiracy, sentenced to death and executed (21 Jan), followed later in the year by his wife, Marie-Antoinette (16 Oct). War declared on England and Dutch republic. Uprising against the Convention in the Vendée. 6 Apr: The Committee of Public Safety is established by the Convention. July: The Reign of Terror begins.

1794
Napoleon Bonaparte promoted to general for his role in fighting British. 1,400 prisoners sentenced to death. 10 June: The Law of 22 Prairial decrees that only a summary of evidence need be heard and sentences should be simplified to either death or acquittal. This leads to a dramatic increase in executions via the guillotine. 27 July: Robespierre arrested following vote in Convention and executed with no trial.

1796
Bonaparte named commander of army in Italy. Defeats Austrians at a number of battles in Italy.

1798
Roman republic declared. Bonaparte invades Egypt. 1 Aug: Admiral Nelson destroys French fleet in Battle of the Nile.

1790

1792

1794

1796

1798

1800

1790
Religious orders suppressed. Privileges of hereditary nobility abolished. Pro-Catholic and anti-revolutionary riots spread across France.

1792
Assembly declares war on Holy Roman empire. Danton takes over the Paris city government and forms the Paris Commune. 10 Aug: Mob storms Tuileries Palace and royal family imprisoned. 21 Sept: National Convention replaces Assembly. Verdun surrenders to Duke of Brunswick's troops. 2–5 Sept: Thousands of prisoners massacred in Paris. 20 Sept: French defeat Prussians at Valmy. Convention announces abolition of royalty.

1795
Backlash against those involved in the Terror. 22 Aug: New constitution adopted by Convention with upper and lower houses of parliament. First Directory elected.

1797
17 Oct: Peace signed between Austria and France.

1799
New republic formed in Naples. At elections in France many government supporters defeated by the extreme left. Bonaparte returns to France and launches coup d'état with French troops occupying key positions in Paris (9 Nov). With Napoleon in power as First Consul, French Revolution is officially ended.

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