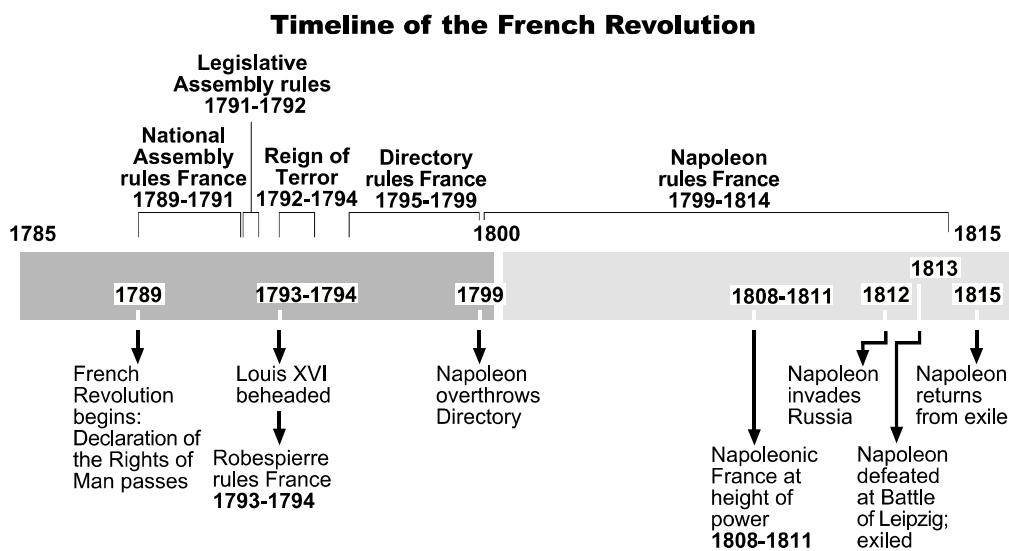


## The French Revolution (1789-1815)

### A Revolt Against Unfair Practices

Perhaps one of the most important events in the history of the world was the French **Revolution**, which took place in 1789. The French Revolution was a violent revolt against the king and his government. This revolution produced major political, economic, and social changes in France and other parts of the world.



The French Revolution is an example of people successfully revolting against the unfair practices of their government. For centuries, the French government had heavily taxed its merchants, workers, and peasants. Many of these people—especially the peasants—were very poor. Peasants were forced to pay rents and feudal dues. They paid with money, crops, and free labor to the nobles and clergy, which made them even poorer. In contrast, nobles and clergy did not have to pay most taxes, even though they were often very wealthy.

When the poor people of France no longer were willing to pay such high taxes and rents, they revolted against the king and his government. They were led by merchants and professionals who wanted a fairer tax system and more voice in government. Some members of the nobility and clergy even joined them.

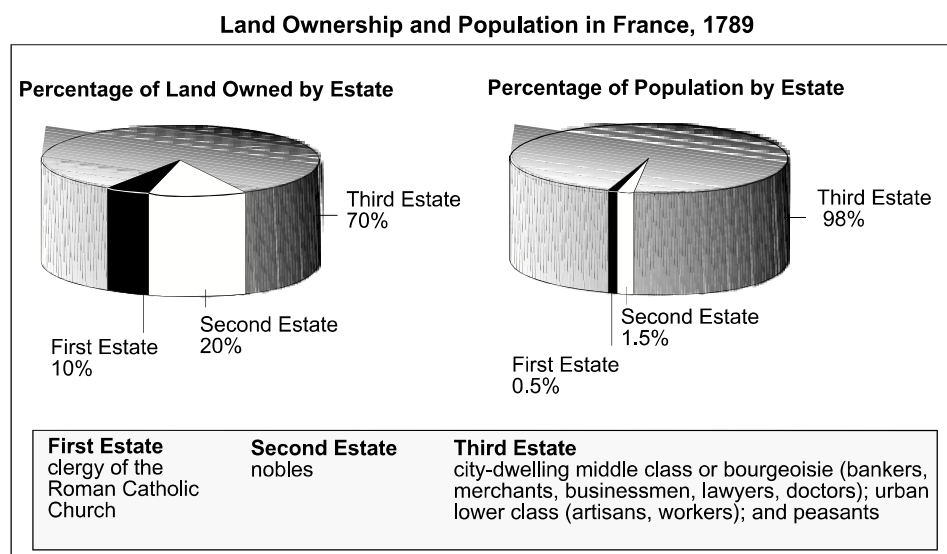
## The Old Regime

The years before 1789 in France were called the *Old Regime*. Old regime means *old system of government*. In the Old Regime the French people were divided into three groups. These groups were called *estates*.

The First Estate was the clergy of the Roman Catholic Church. The First Estate was also the smallest estate. Many members of the clergy were wealthy nobles. They did not have to pay most taxes.

The Second Estate was the nobles. They owned almost 20 percent of the land. Nobles also had many special rights and privileges. Only nobles held the highest positions in government, the church, and the military. They did not have to pay many of the taxes that the peasants had to pay.

The Third Estate was the largest and included everyone else, the commoners, middle class, and peasants. Its wealthiest members were bankers, merchants, businessmen, lawyers, and doctors. They were often well-educated. These people came to be known as the **bourgeoisie**. Many of them resented having to pay more taxes than the nobles. They also called for reforms that would give them more political power. Artisans and workers also made up a small part of the Third Estate. The largest group of the Third Estate was the peasants. Peasants sometimes farmed their own land and sometimes worked land belonging to a noble. Although the peasants could least afford it, they were hit the hardest by both church and government taxes.



## Daily Life in 18<sup>th</sup> Century France: A Contrasting Picture of the Very Rich and the Very Poor

An observer of life in 18<sup>th</sup> century France would have been struck by the great difference in wealth between each group of people. Many of the very poor people barely survived from day to day. In contrast, the rich tended to be very rich. They spent money on pleasure while the poor often went hungry.

Peasant men, women, and children wore tattered clothing and worked in the fields. Their huts were tiny and cramped. In the cities, thousands of people lived in miserable conditions. Narrow streets were filled with garbage; people in filthy clothing shopped at the market, and animals and children played in the streets. Sometimes a group of armed guards would clear a path in the street so horse-drawn carriages could carry well-dressed nobles and clergymen to palaces outside the cities.



Overlooking the peasants' villages might be a giant palace high up on a hill. At their palaces, men, women, and children wearing silk clothing stitched with gold thread strolled in their gardens. Inside the palaces, beautiful art hung or was painted on the walls. Hand-carved furniture was found everywhere. In each room of the palace there would be a large fireplace with fancy, beautifully carved wood. Some women and children might be listening to music played on a piano-type instrument or harp, while the men played cards. Most likely, though, the men would be out hunting in the forests.

## Causes of the French Revolution

### Inequality

To understand the causes of the French Revolution, first think about what we study in history. We study about great leaders, glorious wars, giant palaces, beautiful art, magnificent cathedrals, and famous statues. All of



*Louis XIV*

these are impressive. However, we must realize that all of these achievements had a price. The majority of the common people (peasants and the working class) paid the costs—both in money and life—and a few very rich people benefited.

The practice of the poor paying to benefit the wealthy was common in the 1700s in France. For example, the government taxed the poor to pay for debts Louis XIV ran up while fighting foreign wars during his reign (1643-1715). In addition, expensive court life and money spent on palaces and parties by France's **monarchs** during the 1700s further increased this debt. By Louis XVI's reign (1774-1792), the French **monarchy** was nearly bankrupt.

### The Failing French Economy

In the late 1700s, the French economy suffered many setbacks. These economic problems included unemployment, **inflation** (a sharp increase in prices), and a poor harvest. There were not enough jobs to go around because the population was increasing faster than job opportunities.

Therefore, many French people were unemployed. Prices were rising faster than wages. Goods were scarce. With rising prices and fewer goods, inflation became a serious problem. To make



*Louis XVI*

matters worse, **drought** hit

France in the 1780s. The

drought was followed by a poor harvest, which meant little food for the people. However, the most important reason the French economy was in trouble

was because large sums of money were being spent to help the American colonies win independence from England. By 1789 the French government had no money in its treasury, yet King Louis XVI and Queen Marie Antoinette spent, spent, spent! Their uncaring attitude increased the anger of the French people toward the government.



*Queen Marie Antoinette*

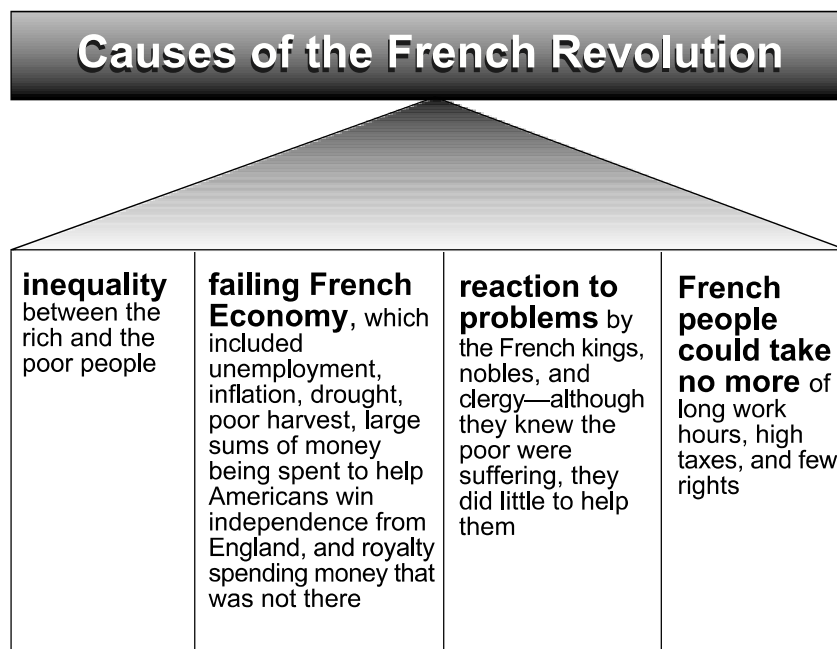


## Reaction to Problems

The French kings, rich nobles, and clergy saw the unrest among the people. They knew the people suffered financial hardships, but they made little attempt at reforms to help the people who suffered most. The majority of the powerful and privileged classes opposed reform. When the king tried to solve the financial problems by taxing the wealthy classes, he found that he was not powerful enough to change the tax laws. Meanwhile the middle-class population, inspired by reading the books of the **Enlightenment** and by the success of the American Revolution, was demanding equality and more participation in the government.

## The French People Could Take No More

In 1789 France was like a balloon ready to burst. The social structure was unfair to most of the people. The common people worked long hours, nearly every day of their lives. Although they paid large amounts of their wages to the government and church in the form of taxes, the common people in 18<sup>th</sup> century France had few rights. The middle class, angry at the nobles and clergy, asked for reforms. The middle class wanted to have a share of the political power. Most nobles and clergy were against reform; they wanted to maintain the *status quo*, or keep things the way they were.



## The Third Estate Organizes the National Assembly

Members of each of the three Estates were represented in the **Estates-General**, the parliament of France. This body had not met for many years, but in May of 1789, King Louis XVI called the Estates-General to meet in Versailles (Ver-sigh) near Paris to discuss financial problems that faced the nation. From the beginning, there was a dispute over voting procedures. This confusion over voting procedures led to a power struggle among the three groups in the Estates-General. The clergy and nobility, or First and Second Estates, wanted each estate to have one vote so they could outnumber the common people, or Third Estate, two to one. The Third Estate felt that the three estates should meet together and that each member should have a vote. Since there were as many members in the Third Estate as in the other two combined, this would give the Third Estate more of a chance to win some reforms.



Louis XVI

French citizens came from all over the country to cheer for members of the Third Estate—clearly the Estate represented the majority of the French people. Even some members of the clergy were in favor of giving peasants more rights and fewer taxes.

The king refused to change the voting procedure of the three Estates. The single vote of the Third Estate was outnumbered by the two votes of the First and Second Estates. In early June 1789, the powerless Third Estate went on **strike**, or quit working. They formed a new group and called themselves the *National Assembly*. This act was the first real act of the French Revolution. In the meantime, the king called another meeting at Versailles. This time Louis XVI would not allow the Third Estate to join the meeting.

On June 20, members of the Third Estate found the hall where their National Assembly was meeting occupied by the king's troops. These members then moved to another large building—the royal *indoor tennis court*. There the Third Estate voted on its own plan. Members of the Third Estate said that their National Assembly would write a constitution for the country. They swore not to separate till they had a written constitution for France. Of the 577 members, all but one accepted this oath known as the

*Tennis Court Oath.* The king realized that the National Assembly was powerful. He did not want the Third Estate alone to draw up a constitution. He ordered the first two estates to join the Third Estate in the National Assembly. Fearing trouble, he also called for the army to come to Paris.

He told the National Assembly that the army was there to protect them. However, he told his wife and close advisors that the army was there to force the members of the National Assembly to go home.

While the National Assembly was meeting, the people of Paris were going wild. Mob violence was everywhere. Believing that the king planned to dissolve the National Assembly and stop reforms, the citizens reacted violently. The spirit of rebellion against the government had spread. People heatedly debated on the streets and in cafes. Many fights broke out among people with conflicting views.

### Increasing Violence

On July 14, 1789 the first act of the Revolution took place. Mobs in Paris and throughout other cities attacked government prisons in search of weapons to defend the National Assembly against the king's troops. The government prison in Paris was called the *Bastille* (ba-steel). The attack on the Bastille became the symbol for the French Revolution. The prison was a symbol of everything wrong with France. It symbolized the power and unfairness of the French monarchy. Today, the French celebrate July 14<sup>th</sup> as their Independence Day. It is still known as *Bastille Day*.

#### Bastille

The Bastille was a famous prison in Paris that stood as a hated symbol of oppression to the French people. It had been used to house political prisoners but was almost empty by the time it was stormed and destroyed on July 14, 1789 by the revolutionists. Ever since then, the people of France have celebrated that date as a national holiday, the way we celebrate our Independence Day on the fourth of July. Bastille Day is celebrated with parades, music, and dancing in the streets.



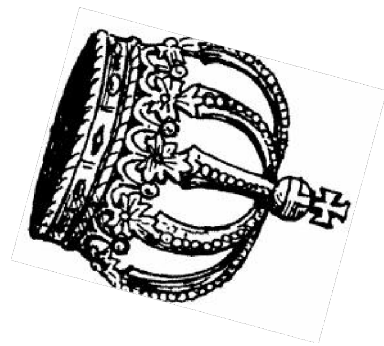
## The National Assembly Made Many Reforms

### The Rights of Man

In August of 1789, the National Assembly passed the *Declaration of the Rights of Man*. This gave all male citizens equal rights before the law. The new laws ended special privileges for the nobles and the clergy. The declaration stated that all political power came from the nation or the people. It also gave the people freedom of speech, of the press, and of religion, as well as the freedom to own property. Unfortunately, and very importantly, the National Assembly did not grant these rights to women.

### A Limited Monarchy

Until the Declaration of the Rights of Man, Louis XVI had been an **absolute monarch**. He had complete and unlimited power over the French government and people. Louis XVI did not want to give up his powers. The new constitution created a **limited monarchy** that was similar to the British government. Louis XVI's power was now restricted. However, the king still held the power to delay new laws.



### A State-Controlled Church

The French government took over church lands. The Catholic church lost its right to choose church officials and clergy. The assembly ruled that church officials and priests were to be elected by property owners and paid as state officials. Many devout French peasants still supported their parish priests. Consequently, these changes in the Catholic church divided the peasants and the bourgeoisie.

### The King Moves to Paris

During September of 1789, the crowds in the streets grew angrier and violence increased. One night a crowd of people, after drinking too much wine, marched to Versailles. At three o'clock in the morning, the crowd reached the palace at Versailles. They yelled for Louis to come to the window of his bedroom. Afraid for his life and his family, Louis appeared. He promised to sign the Declaration of the Rights of Man. He also

promised to move to Paris. By early October, both the royal family (Louis, his wife, and children) and the National Assembly were in Paris. Louis had actually become a prisoner of the people. Every move he made was carefully watched. Meanwhile, the National Assembly began to write a constitution for France.

In early 1791, a French constitution was completed. All the programs of the Old Regime were removed. Men were given equal rights, including the right to vote for their leaders. The king would remain, but his power was greatly limited now. There were still imbalances of power, however. For example, only property owners could hold office. After telling all of the French people that they had a new constitution, the National Assembly broke up on September 30, 1791.

From May 1789 to September 30, 1791, the French system of government and the whole French social system were changed. However, the Revolution was not over. In fact, it was just beginning.



## The Legislative Assembly

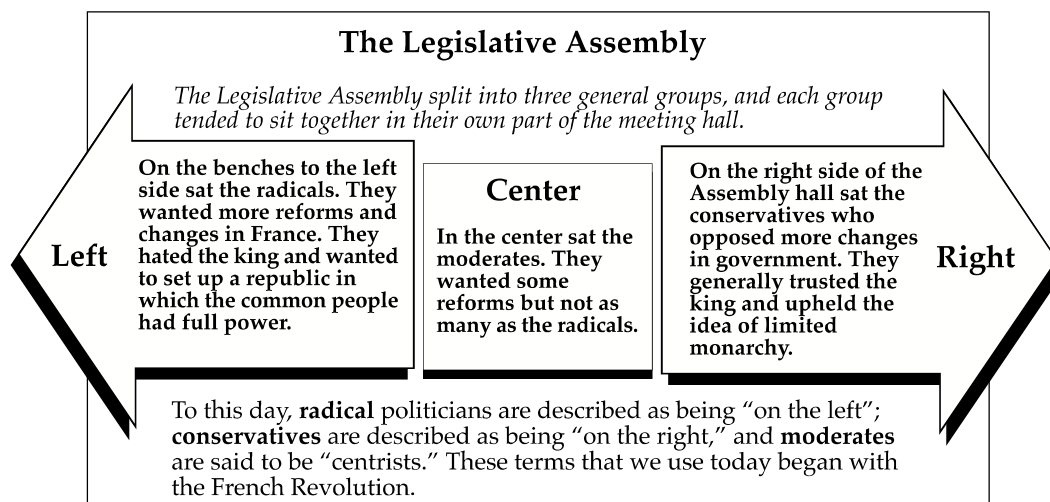
The next period of the French Revolution began October 1, 1791, and lasted until August 10, 1792. The National Assembly stepped down from power after having completed its new constitution. It was followed by a newly elected group called the *Legislative Assembly*.

### The Nobility Asks for Help

During the period of the Legislative Assembly (October 1, 1791 to August 10, 1792), many nobles and clergy left the country. The nobles who left France asked the kings of other European countries to help return the monarchy to France. The king and queen of France were sending secret letters to other kings and queens in Europe begging for help to restore the monarchy. The French people were fearful that the other European countries were surrounding France in order to bring back the system of absolute monarchy.

### France Was Split by Factions

The Legislative Assembly split into three general groups. Each group sat together in the meeting hall. On the right sat the **conservatives**, those who opposed more changes in government. They wanted to keep a limited monarch. On the left side sat the **radicals**. They wanted more reforms and changes in France. They wanted to set up a **republic** and do away with any form of monarchy. In the center sat the **moderates**. They wanted some reforms but not as many as the radicals. Outside the government, there were other extreme groups as well.





Louis XVI

In August 1791, the king of Prussia and emperor of Austria urged European leaders to restore the monarchy in France. The Legislative Assembly feared an invasion by European forces. In April 1792, the Legislative Assembly demanded that King Louis XVI declare war on Austria. Each group in the Legislative Assembly thought a foreign war would benefit their interests. They forced King Louis XVI to declare war on Austria in April 1792.

Within a few weeks, the National Assembly's fear came true, and France was invaded by both Austria and Prussia. Paris was in danger of being captured. The Prussian king told the French people that if any member of the French royal family were hurt, the French people would suffer. The Prussian king's threat only helped unite the French people. More and more people throughout France were feeling the revolutionary spirit. They hoped that the war would give them a chance to spread their revolution to all the peoples of Europe.

### The French Army Is Victorious

The Prussians and Austrians were slowly winning the war. However, the peasants and the middle class had too much to lose if France were defeated. The French gathered strength and defeated a large Prussian and Austrian army in early September. The French revolutionary army had **triumphed**. Prussian and Austrian soldiers were forced out of France.

### The End of the Legislative Assembly

The Legislative Assembly gave up on the idea of a limited monarchy. The Constitution of 1791 was set aside, and the king was **deposed**. Louis XVI was king no longer. The Assembly then ended its own existence by calling for the election of a new legislature. The new government was called the *National Convention*. The members of the National Convention met and declared France to be a republic. This was known as the *First French Republic*. A new constitution was written.

## The King and Queen Die

Louis XVI was no longer the king. Under the First French Republic, he was now a common citizen. Many radicals believed he had betrayed his country to foreign armies to keep his power. Louis XVI was eventually tried and found guilty as an enemy of the state. On January 21, 1793, Louis XVI was taken to a place in Paris called the *Place de la Revolution*. He was told to kneel. His head was placed on a block. At 10:21 a.m., he was beheaded by a machine known as the **guillotine**. Marie Antoinette, the queen, was later beheaded in October 1793.

## The Reign of Terror



Robespierre

The French Revolution was about to enter its most violent period. Historians call the period from the end of 1792 through July 1794, the *Reign of Terror*. It was a bloody period. About 21,000 French people were guillotined during the Reign of Terror.

During this period, both men and women of the middle class joined political clubs. The most radical of these clubs was the **Jacobins**. The most famous Jacobin and notorious leader of the Reign of Terror was Robespierre (rob-ess-pee-yair). During the Reign of Terror, French society underwent many changes. Some changes were as follows:

- a new calendar was developed with no Sundays and new names for the months
- no jewelry could be worn
- no person could be named Louis
- churches were renamed
- all people would address each other as *citizen*, to show that everyone was equal in society

In the summer of 1793, the National Convention formed the Committee of Public Safety. As head of this committee, Robespierre decided who was an enemy of the republic. Those accused were tried in the morning and guillotined that very afternoon. From July 1793 to July 1794, he ruled

France as a dictator. By October of 1793, the radicals began to turn on each other. Many leaders who had helped set up the republic were executed. Many of the leaders of the Reign of Terror became victims of their own terror. For example, Robespierre was beheaded on July 28, 1794. The Reign of Terror ended in July 1794. Besides the 21,000 French people who were beheaded, 19,000 others died in prisons or in massacres. Most of the victims were innocent peasants or bourgeoisie, common people for whom the revolution had supposedly been fought.

With all the problems in France during the Reign of Terror, several important changes came out of it.

- Monarchy was replaced with a republican government.
- The new government could begin the work of putting the ideas of the revolution into practice.
- Workers and peasants were given new political rights.
- Free schools for children were started.
- Price controls and laws creating taxes based on income were passed.

The French showed people around Europe that revolution is not only possible but could be successful. Foreign invaders were unable to stop the revolution. The French were able to export the ideas of the revolution. Because of this, European monarchs were frightened.

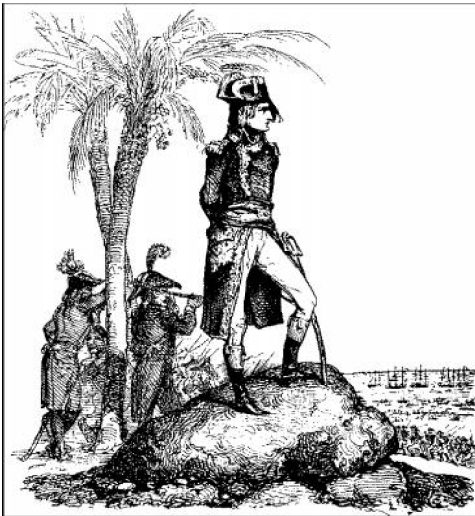
## The Directory: A New French Government Full of the Old Ways

After the death of Robespierre, the violence in France stopped, at least for a while. In 1795 the National Convention wrote a new constitution. France would continue as a republic. In this new constitution, five men were put in charge of the executive office, called the *Directory*. Consequently, this government was also known as the *Directory*. France was beginning to suffer from many of its pre-revolutionary political problems. Power was now in the hands of a small group of men. The constitution gave the right to vote only to those who owned property. The wealthier members of France had regained their influence in government.

The new government was as corrupt as many of the old ones. It, like the ones before it, was unable to solve the country's problems. The majority of the French population was prevented from participating in the government and the legislature. Most French families, for example, were once again unable to pay the high price for food, housing, and clothing. As a result, many people wanted to bring the monarchy back as a way of restoring law and order. The time seemed ripe for a strong leader to seize power.

## Napoleon Rises to Power

Napoleon Bonaparte, a brilliant young officer, had fought on the side of the revolutionaries in the French Revolution. He became a general at the



*Napoleon Bonaparte*

age of 24 and a national hero. His military victories against foreign enemies of France made him famous. He quickly moved to overthrow the unpopular Directory government. In 1799 the Directory period ended, and Napoleon took control of France. In the same year, Napoleon wrote another constitution which gave himself most of the power in France. Napoleon could do this because the French people believed he could end the violence of the Revolution, and Napoleon had the support of the army, which could control the people.





## Napoleon, the Emperor

From 1799 until 1814, Napoleon ruled as a dictator. His political and military accomplishments were so great that these years are called the *Napoleonic Era*.

In 1804 Napoleon took the title of Emperor of France. During his reign, Napoleon carried out several important reforms and increased the power and efficiency of the central government. He reorganized the Bank of France and placed it partly under government control. He improved canals and roads. He encouraged freedom of religion in France and set up schools and universities. His most important act was to rewrite the laws of France. He wrote the laws so that everyone could read them. These were named *The Napoleonic Code*. The Napoleonic Code is still used in France today.



*Napoleon Bonaparte*

Under Napoleon, the French army was very successful. French armies defeated the English, Austrians, Russians, Italians, Russians, and Spanish. French territory grew as more and more land was taken from France's enemies. Between 1808 and 1811, Napoleonic France reached the height of its power.

### The Invasion of Russia

Like other leaders who achieved success very quickly, Napoleon thought his army could not be defeated. This was a mistake. Napoleon invaded Russia with an army of 500,000 in the early summer of 1812. At first, the invasion of Russia was a success. The French army moved deeper and deeper into Russia. When French troops reached Moscow, the capital of Russia, they found it empty. The Russians had burned everything so that the French were left with nothing but wasteland.

Then the brutal Russian winter came. Being far away from home with supplies running out, having no winter clothing, and being constantly attacked by small groups of Russian soldiers, the French army weakened.

About 400,000 of France's army starved or froze to death during the retreat from Russia. The nations of Europe joined together against France. In 1813 an army made up of soldiers from England, Austria, Prussia, Russia, and Sweden defeated Napoleon at the Battle of Leipzig.

### **Farewell, Napoleon**

In May 1814, Napoleon was forced to leave France. He was sent to prison on the island of Elba. The armies of Prussia, Russia, Great Britain, and Austria then restored France to a monarchy. Nevertheless, in May 1815, Napoleon escaped and returned to France. For 100 days he ruled again as emperor. He tried one last time to bring back the greatness of the empire. However, England, Austria, Prussia, and Russia sent their troops to defeat him. In June, the European army led by Britain's Duke of Wellington met Napoleon near the town of Waterloo in Belgium. At the Battle of Waterloo, Napoleon's army was defeated once and for all. Napoleon was taken prisoner and sent to the Island of Saint Helena where he died in 1821.



*cartoon of Napoleon's troops  
leaving Russia*

## Review

The French Revolution of 1789 changed the entire social, economic, and political way of life in France. Absolute monarchy was gone. *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity* became the slogan of the French Revolution. In other words, everyone (except for women) would be free and equal.

France's revolution went through many twists and turns. Eventually the king lost his powers, and many reforms granted the people important rights. The government did not become stable, however, until Napoleon became dictator in 1799.

The French Revolution and the Napoleonic Era began a new era in Europe. The French exported the revolutionary spirit to the many countries Napoleon had conquered or made his enemies into allies. This revolutionary spirit frightened many kings and queens in Europe. European leaders knew that to defeat Napoleon, they would have to join forces. Napoleon's invasion in Russia was his biggest error. He let his victories (before Russia) blind him into thinking that nothing could stop him—not even the Russian winter.

Nevertheless, for all of his errors, Napoleon must be considered as a great French leader. His accomplishments include the following.

- Napoleon exported the revolution throughout Europe.
- Everywhere the French army was victorious, new constitutions were drawn up.
- Feudalism and serfdom were wiped out.
- The Napoleonic codes, which stressed equality before the law, were put into effect.
- Religious freedom became law.

After Napoleon's downfall, many conservative monarchs returned to power; however, many of Napoleon's reforms remained in effect.