The French Revolution

After funding the American Revolution, France was in debt by 1789. A *lot* of debt. To make matters worse, poor weather conditions destroyed the fields, which led to grain shortages and widespread famine. France was in crisis, and King Louis XVI knew it, too.

During the 17th and 18th centuries, an intellectual movement called the Enlightenment spread throughout Europe. Philosophers and intellectuals spread ideas involving politics, religion, philosophy, and science. Their ideas challenged the traditional view that governments have a divine right to absolute power. In France, people started questioning the political and social system known as the ancien régime. French society was divided into three social classes: the First Estate, the clergy; the Second Estate, nobility; and the Third Estate, which included the bourgeoisie, or middle class, and peasants. Despite their wealth and privilege, the First and Second Estate were exempted from paying taxes, and the majority of taxes were levied upon the Third Estate, which made up 98% of the population.

In order to address France's financial crisis, Louis XVI called the Estates General—an assembly of representatives from the three estates—on May 5, 1789. Each estate, however, only got one vote, meaning 98% of France's population could be outvoted by the other 2%. That's exactly what happened: the First and Second Estates voted to keep their privileges, putting the financial burden on the Third Estate. This unfair representation outraged the Third Estate, and they decided to break away from the Estates General to create their own National Assembly. They gathered at a nearby tennis court and took an oath—the Tennis Court Oath—to stick together until a new constitution was established. This marked the beginning of the French Revolution.

Social unrest continued to grow, and rumors that Louis XVI was preparing a military coup to suppress the National Assembly spread. On July 14, 1789, a crowd of Parisians stormed the Bastille, a prison in Paris often viewed as a symbol of tyranny. They seized weapons and freed prisoners as a protest against the king.

Rebellions spread throughout France, especially in the countryside where society revolved around the feudal

system. In response to these peasant uprisings, fearful landowners met with the National Assembly and agreed to abolish feudalism. The National Assembly also adopted a document called the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. It was to serve as a preamble to the new constitution and emphasized that everyone had the right to liberty, property, and security.

Louis XVI, feeling an increasing threat to his authority and power, attempted to flee France with his family in 1791—but they were captured and brought back to Paris. The king's unsuccessful flight further solidified the perception that he was untrustworthy and plotting against the revolution. This eventually led to Louis XVI being charged with treason and publicly executed on January 21, 1793, officially marking the end of the French monarchy and the beginning of the French Republic.

Following the king's execution, neighboring countries were concerned. They were worried about the spread of the revolution and the weakening of their own monarchies, which led to wars between France and Great Britain, Austria, Prussia, and others.

During this violent time, one political group rose to power—the Jacobins. The Jacobins were a radical group of revolutionaries led by Maximilien Robespierre. They were committed to keeping the French Revolution alive and took drastic measures against people they viewed as a threat to the revolution. During the 10-month period known as the Reign of Terror, thousands were killed. But on July 27, 1794, Robespierre himself was arrested and executed.

After the death of Robespierre, the Jacobins lost power. The new, less extreme government was called the Directory, led by five men elected from the National Assembly. But this new government faced a lot of challenges, including political corruption and financial difficulties. People's lack of confidence in the Directory gave Napoleon Bonaparte, a respected military general, an opportunity to rise to power. In 1799, he launched a coup d'état, or government takeover, of the Directory. He replaced it with a consulate, which was supposed to reflect the will of the people. But in reality, Napoleon had absolute power. He appointed himself as France's First Consul, officially ending the French Revolution and starting the Napoleonic era.