

# Teaching about the French Revolution

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This article offers summaries of events along with essential questions, documents and document-based questions for teaching about the French Revolution and some of its leading participants. The wars of the 18th century, particularly the Seven Years War (1756-1763), depleted France's finances and almost completely destroyed its lucrative colonial empire. Investment in the American Revolution reduced the country to near-bankruptcy while provoking increased interest among the French people in principles of equality and freedom. On the eve of the French Revolution, the *Ancien Regime*, a centralized, absolutist state headed by King Louis XVI, was faced with an economic and political crisis. This crisis ended its control over the machinery of the state and unleashed social forces that ended the exclusive rule of landed privilege in France. It also led to the emergence of a new ascendant social class, the bourgeoisie, as the dominant group in French society.

Question 1: Why did the government of Louis XVI face a crisis on the eve of the French Revolution?

The *Ancien Regime* was characterized by a division of French society into four (or five) primary social classes and three caste-like social orders or "estates." The class of the *nobility*, representing approximately one to two percent of the population, controlled key positions in the state, church, and armed forces. The class of the *bourgeoisie* was composed of wealthy business owners, highly placed civil servants, and financiers. One key feature of the Revolution involved the inability of the bourgeoisie to gain positions of power in the state, and their resultant willingness to make an alliance with lower classes. A third class, the *petite bourgeoisie*, included members of the professions, artisans, and tradesmen living in cities and towns. The urban mass that supported the Revolution included many people with more marginal economic status. Collectively they were identified by their plain clothing (they wore trousers rather than the knee-breaches favored by the wealthy) and known as the "Sans-Culottes." The lowest class in this hierarchical social pyramid, the *peasantry*, harbored hostility toward a nobility that constantly tried to extend its feudal privileges over them. The first of the three traditional "estates" was the *clergy*, with approximately 100,000 members and ownership of about one-tenth of the land. The second estate, the nobility, with several hundred thousand members, owned approximately one-fifth of the land. The third estate, of about twenty-five million people, included everyone else, from the richest bourgeois to the humblest peasant.

Faced with the growing in power of the King, and the severe financial crisis of the 1780s, the nobility attempted to gain control of the state. It enlisted the help of the bourgeoisie and called for the convening of a national legislative assembly known as the Estates-General. When the 3rd Estate demanded double representation for itself in the Estates-General because of its overwhelming numbers, the alliance broke apart. This left the 3rd Estate angry and resentful of the nobility. In the city of Paris, the commercial and financial center of France, popular unrest was fed partly by a dramatic rise in the price of bread. Led by the large bourgeoisie, a National Assembly was formed and soon renamed the Constituent Assembly. When the King threatened to take military action, the bourgeoisie created a National Guard to resist the King and to control the civilian population.

Activities: **Draw a social pyramid diagram that represents the class structure of pre-Revolutionary France.**

Construct a time-line of events leading to the economic and political crisis of the *Ancien Regime*. Create a political cartoon expressing the views of one of the social classes or estates.

**Question 2: Why did political and ideological disputes sharpen internal conflict and lead to war?**

In July of 1789, the Royal Cavalry attacked demonstrators in the city of Paris. A popular uprising followed that included the storming of the armory at the Bastille fortress. The King soon was forced to give in to demands for reform. The Constituent Assembly issued the famous Declaration of the Rights of Man (written in large part by the Marquis de Lafayette), an essentially “bourgeois” declaration that sanctified the rule of property and shunned direct democracy. France was now a Constitutional Monarchy.

Rumors began to circulate about aristocratic conspiracies against the new government. The Constituent Assembly responded by nationalizing Church lands and suppressing the religious orders of France. At the time, the Assembly was divided into radicals and conservatives. The radicals, called the Jacobins, sat to the left of the Assembly President. The more conservatives Girondin sat on the right (origin of the terms leftwing and rightwing).

In general, the bourgeoisie were content with the Constitutional Monarchy. However, in 1791 there was an upsurge in popular political activity in the city of Paris. This democratic movement was led by Republican clubs that wanted to end the monarchy. It included the Jacobins and the Sans-Culottes. That year, a new Constitution was proposed which would require strict property qualifications for voting. The popular movement criticized it as the creation of an “aristocracy of wealth”. The Constituent Assembly, its work completed, dissolved in preparation for the election of the Legislative Assembly.

In the midst of political and social turmoil, including National Guard attacks against demonstrations, the King was captured as he tried to flee France. He was returned to Paris and placed under arrest. Soon after, Austria and Prussia called on the nations of Europe to invade France to protect monarchical rule. The Legislative Assembly, dominated by the Girondin demanded a crusade against the monarchs of Europe. The various parties and factions of France each had reasons to support such a war. In April, 1792, France declared on Austria.

Activities: **Write speeches or newspaper editorials defending or condemning the proposed Constitution.**

**Question 3: Why did social and political conflict lead to a “Reign of Terror”?**

When Louis XVI refused to accede to Republican demands, popular calls were made for his dethronement. When the Girondin refused to agree, they began to lose power. In September, 1792, the “Second Revolution” began when the Sans-Culottes and Jacobins, headed by Maximilien Robespierre, called for a new National Convention and for universal suffrage. They formed a Provisional Executive Council to lead the National Convention. The discovery of secret papers exchanged between the kings of France and Austria led to the arrest and trial of Louis XVI. In January, 1793, the king was beheaded on the guillotine as a traitor. The power of the Girondin was broken and a Committee of Public Safety, led by Jacobins, was formed. A pro-Girondin revolt broke out in the countryside and peasant revolts occurred in the region known as the Vendee. The Committee of Public Safety, which now ruled France in the name of the Convention, replied by drafting the entire population “en masse” into the armed forces.

During the period known as the “Reign of Terror,” the Committee of Public Safety attempted to wipe out enemies of the Revolution and protect France from invasion. The Committee also instituted a policy of de-Christianization, developed a revolutionary cult of liberty and reason, and issued a new revolutionary calendar. Year One began on September 22, 1792, the first day of the French Republic.

The “Reign of Terror’s” list of enemies, which initially included royalists, rebels, and speculators, was extended to include prostitutes, atheists, and others considered enemies of “Virtue.” In 1794, Georges Danton, a moderate Jacobin leader, was executed for trying to stop the terror. National Convention members finally turned on Robespierre and he was also executed. In the end, the “Reign of Terror” led to approximately 40,000 deaths.

**Activities:** Stage mock trials of Louis XVI, Danton and Robespierre for crimes against the French people.

#### **Question 4: Does Revolution inevitably produce reaction?**

By 1794, France’s revolutionary popular army prevailed over the mostly mercenary armies of its enemies. As danger of foreign invasion receded, the Committee of Public Safety increasingly lost favor and in the month of Thermidor (July-August), 1794, counter-revolutionary forces gained power. The Thermidorian Reaction ended France’s experiment with social democracy. Bourgeois, or upper class, rule was re-established with a “White Terror” against Jacobins and the Sans-Culottes.

In 1795, a Royalist revival and uprising was suppressed. A new legislative body replaced the Convention and re-introduced property qualifications for voting. It elected a five-man Directory and a Council of 500. Critics of this new regime were either deported or executed. In the summer of 1799, France faced a new crisis as the tide of war turned against it. As the armies of its enemies advanced towards France, the Jacobins were on the verge of regaining power. This alarmed the Thermidorians who planned a military dictatorship to ensure centralized control and protect bourgeois rule from its enemies on the left—the Jacobins—and its enemies on the right—the Royalists. In a military coup, they installed Napoleon and two others as a ruling council. With this the French Revolution ended and the dictatorship of Napoleon began.

**Activity:** Students debate whether they would have supported the use of violence against enemies of the republic to protect gains made by the French Revolution.

### **A. Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen (1789)**

**Instructions:** The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen set forth the ideals of the French Revolution. It was issued on August 27, 1789. It argued that the government of the country belonged to all the people, not just the monarchy and its supporters. The aim of government was to protect natural rights and liberty. Read the three selections and answer the questions that follow them. In your opinion, what other historical documents express ideas that are similar to the points raised in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen? Explain.

**1. The representatives of the French people, assembled in National Convention, recognizing that human laws which do not derive from the eternal laws of justice and of reason are only the outrages of ignorance or despotism against humanity; convinced that forgetfulness and contempt of the natural rights of man are the sole causes of the crimes and misfortunes of the world, have resolved to set forth in a solemn declaration these sacred and inalienable rights, in order that all citizens, being able constantly to compare the acts of the government with the aim of every social institution, may never allow themselves to be oppressed and degraded by tyranny, in order that the people always may have before their eyes the bases of their liberty and welfare; the magistrate, the rule of his duties; the legislator, the object of his mission.**

### Questions

According to the preamble to the “Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen,” who is proposing this document?

Why do the authors of this document believe it is so important?

2. [T]he National Convention proclaims in the presence of the Universe, and before the eyes of the Immortal Legislator, the following declaration of the rights of man and citizen. The aim of every political association is the maintenance of the natural and inalienable rights of many and the development of all their attributes. . . . These rights appertain equally to all men, whatever the difference in their physical and moral powers. Equality of rights is established by nature, society, far from impairing it, guarantees it against the abuse of power which renders it illusory. Liberty is the power which appertains to man to exercise all his faculties at will; it has justice for rule, the rights of others for limits, nature for principle; and the law for a safeguard.

### Questions

Who is most likely the “Immortal legislator”?

What should be the fundamental premise of all societies?

What is the origin of this basic right?

3. The rights to assemble peaceably, the right to manifest one’s opinions, either by means of the press or in any other manner, are such necessary consequences of the principle of the liberty of man that the necessity of enunciating them presumes either the presence or the recent memory of despotism. The law may forbid only whatever is injurious to society; it may order only whatever is useful thereto. Every law which violates the inalienable rights of many is essentially unjust and tyrannical; it is not a law at all. Property is the right of each and every citizen to enjoy and to dispose of the portion of goods that is guaranteed to him by law. The right of property is limited, as are all other rights, by the obligation to respect the rights of others. It may not be so exercised as to prejudice the security, or the liberty, or the existence, or the property of our fellow men.

### Questions

What rights were protected by this section of the document?

What is the status of laws that violate inalienable rights?

## B. Maximilien Robespierre and the French Revolution

**Source:** Rudé, George, ed. *Robespierre* (Great Lives Observed) Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

**Instructions:** In these selections, Maximilien Robespierre, the leader of the Jacobins and the Committee of Public Safety, explains his views on some of the most pressing issues of the French Revolution. Briefly summarize the main idea in each passage. Use your summaries to write an essay explaining his revolutionary philosophy. In the conclusion to your essay, explain your views on his claims.

**1. The Right to Vote and Immutable Laws of Human Society (March 1791).** “Why are we gathered in this legislative assembly? Doubtless to restore to the French nation the exercise of imprescriptible [inalienable] rights that belong to every citizen. This is the main purpose of every political constitution. If it fulfills this obligation, it is just and free; if it fails to do so, it is nothing but a conspiracy against mankind. You recognized this truth yourselves, and in a striking manner, when you decided, before beginning your great work, that a solemn declaration must be made of the sacred rights that serve as the immutable foundations on which it rests. All men are born and remain free, and are equal at law. Sovereignty derives from the nation as a whole. The law is the expression of the general will. All citizens have the right to contribute to its making, either directly by themselves or through their freely elected representatives. All citizens are admissible to every public office, and no distinction is made between them except in respect of their virtues and talents. These are the principles that you have enshrined.”

**2. Food Supplies and Limits on Private Property Rights (1792).** “The first social law . . . assures every member of society of the means of existence; all others are subordinated to it; property has only been founded and protected to give it greater strength; and the very basis of property is to ensure the means to live. It is not true that property can ever be in conflict with the right to live. Food that is necessary for man’s existence is as sacred as life itself. . . . Any commercial speculation that I engage in to the danger of my neighbor’s life is not a business dealing; it is an act of brigandage [crime] and a form of fratricide [murder]. If we adopt this principle, what is the problem to be resolved when we legislate on food supplies? It is to assure to all members of society the right to enjoy that share of the fruits of the earth that is necessary for their existence, to guarantee a fair price for their labor to the landowners and cultivators, and to leave the surplus to the freedom of the market. . . . Doubtless, if all men were just and virtuous, if greed were never tempted to plunder the substance of the people; if, responsive to the promptings of nature and reason, the rich all looked on themselves as the housekeepers of society or as the brothers of the poor; if such were the case, one might recognize no other law but the most unlimited freedom. But if it is true that avarice may speculate on want and tyranny on popular despair, if it is true that every passion may declare war on suffering humanity, why should not laws be framed to repress these abuses? Why should they not be made to arrest the hand of the death-dealing monopolist as they would that of the common murderer?”

**4. Revolutionary Government (1793).** “The object of constitutional government is to preserve the Republic; the object of revolutionary government is to establish it. Revolution is the war waged by liberty against its enemies; a constitution is that which crowns the edifice of freedom once victory has been won and the nation is at peace. . . . The principal concern of constitutional government is civil liberty; that of revolutionary government, public liberty. Under a constitutional government little more is required than to protect the individual against abuses by

the state itself against the factions that assail it from every quarter. To good citizens revolutionary government owes the full protection of the state; to the enemies of the people, it owes only death.”

**5. Robespierre Defends his Actions (1794).** “I know only two parties, the party of good citizens and the party of the bad. . . . I see a world peopled with dupes and imposters, but the number of the imposters is the smaller. It is they who must be punished for the wrongs and the ills of the world. . . . They call me a tyrant. . . . The arms of liberty must not be touched except by pure hands. Let us purify the national system of surveillance [vigilance], instead of covering up vice . . . I was made to combat crime, not to temper it. The time has not yet come when men of good will can serve their country unmolested. The defenders of liberty will be so many names for the proscription lists [execution] as long as the horde of rascals is in control.

### **C. Contemporaries and Historians Evaluate Robespierre’s Role in History**

**Source:** Rudé, George, ed. *Robespierre* (Great Lives Observed) Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

**Instructions:** Dubois de Crancé and Merlin De Thionville were contemporaries of Robespierre. J. M. Thompson and George Rude are historians. Examine the passages below and consider how they each evaluate Maximilien Robespierre. How are their opinions similar and how are they different? Who views Robespierre in the most positive light? Which view comes closest to your own? Explain.

**Dubois de Crancé:** “Robespierre had planned the total destruction of the Convention and the organization of a new authority even more subjected to his will. To him France’s population was too widely dispersed; this mass weighed too heavily in the scales of his would-be supreme dictatorship. . . . That is why Robespierre had for the past month abandoned the Committees and had been daily parading the names of its members before his Jacobins as men no longer deserving of their confidence. . . . I was one of those prescribed and denounced. Denounced for the second time in eighteen months, this time by Robespierre. . . . Being accused, I had to justify my conduct, and I went directly to present myself at the Assembly. As I mounted the steps, one of my colleagues, Citizen Gaston, grasped my hand and said: “You must speak today or you are a dead man.” . . . I said that I had been free to make my escape, I had preferred to offer my head if I were found guilty, but that I invoked the justice of the Convention.”

**Merlin De Thionville:** “Robespierre’s temperament underwent a remarkable development: it began by being melancholic and ended by being violent. . . . in the Convention he frothed at the mouth as he spoke. . . . His intellectual faculties were always limited. . . . He always had few ideas, but they were stubbornly held; little imagination, but a tenacious memory; little flexibility, but he always moved in the same direction. . . . Robespierre had no talents other than those of his vices, and of these he was able to exploit but a few. Sometimes he displayed oratorical talent, which is in itself far from being enough to make an orator, and he never displayed the slightest talent for action. . . . It is not Robespierre who is remarkable. . . ; it is the Republic. . . . History will say little of this monster.”

**J. M. Thompson (1935):** It is unfortunate, for a fair judgment by Robespierre, that most of the descriptions of him handed down by historians came originally from men who, either by conviction or by policy, were his enemies, and that they were first published at a time when it was

fashionable to blacken his memory. Nevertheless, it is possible to reconstruct a sufficiently life-like figure from descriptions which, however prejudiced, are at any rate contemporary. . . . Most of what was good in him may be summed up in three words—Democrat, Prophet, and Puritan. He sincerely believed, in all his life, in the wisdom and goodness of the common people; believed in it at a time when the fashion was to look for enlightenment and virtue from above, not from below; and believed in it, not as a consoling phrase from the pulpit, but as a political axiom, issuing in manhood franchise, equal justice, and the administration of property as a trust for the poor. Again, as he clung to his first principles of liberty and equality, even at moments when, for the best of reasons, he was forced to compromise them, so he refused to be diverted by the opportunism of government from pursuing his vision of a republic founded on virtue and sustained by religion.

**George Rude (1958):** “To Robespierre, the sovereignty of the people, the triumph of the Revolution in the interests of the small proprietors (though not of the wholly disposed) was all-important: this theme is constant and runs through all his speeches and actions from June 1789 to Thermidor. In 1791, the war was condemned—not on pacifist grounds, but in the belief that it would strengthen the Court and counterrevolution; after August 1792, this particular danger no longer existed. Objection to the death penalty was abandoned because he believed that the King’s survival after abdication would create a tangible center for aristocratic intrigue. Similarly, the liberal of 1789-91 gave way to the protagonist of “revolutionary government” not by virtue of any deeply rooted devotion to “totalitarian” principles, but because he had become convinced, by the experience of military defeat, treachery, inflation and “federalist” disruption.”

## Portraits of Napoleon: Perception versus Reality

**Source:** A. Grant, “Life Is Short, but Good Publicity Lasts Forever,” *The New York Times*, June 26, 2005, AR 27

It can be argued that Jacques-Louis David, the official portrait artist of the French Emperor, invented the Napoleon Bonaparte that we know today. His portraits present idealized versions of his subject intended to convey messages to the public and future generations about the Emperor’s character and concerns.

A diplomat for the king of Spain, who had commissioned ‘Bonaparte Crossing the Alps at Grand-Saint-Bernard’ (1800-1), once complained to a friend that the picture “looks like Bonaparte about as much as it looks like you.” Bonaparte was a small man, but in the picture he is made to look large in relationship to the horse. His image was further enhanced by showing the horse spooked and bucking while the masterly rider remains calm. Even the use of a horse in the image is a public relations device. Napoleon actually crossed the Alps on a mule.

While “Bonaparte Crossing the Alps” presents a man of action, “The Emperor Napoleon in His Study at the Tuileries” (1812) offers an image of the Emperor Napoleon as a man of reason, hard work and self-control. To Napoleon’s left is a scroll of the Code Napoléon (French Civil Code), probably his greatest administrative achievement. The clock in the background shows the time as 4:13. We know it is late at night rather than in the afternoon because the candles are nearly melted. Wrinkles in Napoleon’s uniform, especially in the trousers, suggest that he has been working all night. In his left hand is a snuff box containing tobacco, possibly used to keep him alert while he worked. The “hand in the waistcoat” pose was common in 18th century European art. Although he is now Emperor of France, it implies that Napoleon remains modest and moderate in his actions.



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[www.nga.gov/kids/napoleon/n-full400.jpg](http://www.nga.gov/kids/napoleon/n-full400.jpg)

### Questions

1. Can you find other symbols in these portraits of Napoleon? What do they suggest about his character and concerns? How do these pictures tell different stories about Napoleon?
2. Examine other portraits of famous people. What messages do they convey about the subjects?