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Cambridge International AS Level

European History 1789–1917

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Contents

Introduction 4

1 The French Revolution and Napoleon 1789–1804 6
- The aims and domestic problems of French politicians 1789–91 8
- The instability of French governments 1791–99 19
- Napoleon Bonaparte's rise to power 30
- Napoleon's domestic aims 1799–1804 32

2 The Industrial Revolution c. 1800–50 42
- Causes of the Industrial Revolution by 1800 44
- What factors encouraged and discouraged industrialisation from 1800 to 1850? 48
- The social effects of the Industrial Revolution on different classes 57
- The political effects of the Industrial Revolution up to 1850 63

3 Liberalism and nationalism: Italy and Germany 1848–71 72
- The rise of nationalism in Germany and Italy 74
- Prussia and the unification of Germany 81
- Italian leaders and the unification of Italy 95

4 The origins of the First World War 106
- The development of the alliance system 108
- Militarism and the naval race 116
- Instability in the Balkans 123
- Reasons for the outbreak of war in 1914 126

5 The Russian Revolution 1905–17 136
- Russia at the beginning of the 20th century 138
- The causes and immediate outcomes of the 1905 Revolution 141
- The strengths and weaknesses of Romanov rule 1906–14 148
- The causes of the February Revolution in 1917 152
- The Bolsheviks' rise to power 158

6 Examination skills 168
- What skills will be tested in examination, and how? 170
- Knowledge and understanding questions 172
- Analysis and evaluation questions 175
- Source-based questions 182
- Examination technique 193

Index 196

Acknowledgements 200

Introduction

Cambridge International AS Level History is a new series of three books that offer complete and thorough coverage of Cambridge International AS Level History (syllabus code 9389). Each book is aimed at one of the AS History syllabuses issued by Cambridge International Examinations for first examination in 2014. These books may also prove useful for students following other A Level courses covering similar topics. Written in clear and accessible language, *Cambridge International AS Level History – European History 1789–1917* enables students to gain the knowledge, understanding and skills to succeed in their AS Level course (and ultimately in further study and examination).

Syllabus and examination

Students wishing to take just the AS Level take two separate papers at the end of a one-year course. If they wish to take the full A Level there are two possible routes. The first is to take the two AS papers at the end of the first year and a further two A Level papers at the end of the following year. The second is to take the two AS papers as well as the two A Level papers at the end of a two-year course. For the full A Level, all four papers must be taken. The two AS papers are outlined below.

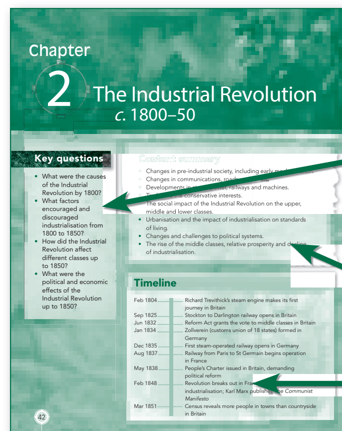
Paper 1 lasts for one hour and will be based on *Liberalism and Nationalism in Italy and Germany 1848–71***.** The paper will contain at least three different sources, and candidates will have to answer two questions on them. Students are not expected to have extensive historical knowledge to deal with these questions, but they are expected to be able to understand, evaluate and utilise the sources in their answers, and to have sound background knowledge of the period. In the first question (a) candidates are required to consider the sources and answer a question on one aspect of them. In the second question (b) candidates must use the sources and their own knowledge and understanding to address how far the sources support a given statement. Chapter 3 provides the appropriate level of historical knowledge to deal with Paper 1.

Paper 2 lasts for an hour and a half. The paper contains four questions, and candidates must answer two of them. Each question has two parts: part (a) requires a causal explanation; and part (b) requires consideration of significance and weighing of the relative importance of factors. A question on each of the four topics outlined in the Cambridge syllabus (for example, *The Industrial Revolution* c. *1800–50)* will appear in every examination paper.

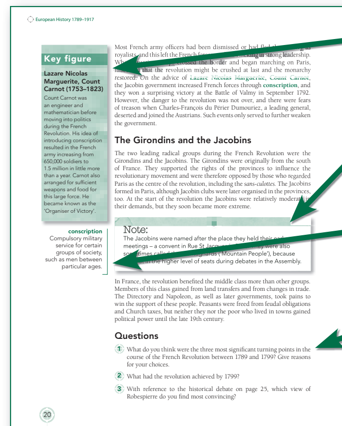
Examination skills

Chapter 6, which is entirely dedicated to helping students with examination skills and techniques, gives guidance on answering all the different types of exam questions. Students should read the relevant section of the exam skills chapter *before* addressing practice questions, to remind themselves of the principles of answering each type of question. Remember that facts alone are not enough; they must be accompanied by a clear understanding of the questions and must employ a range of skills such as focused writing, evaluation and analysis.

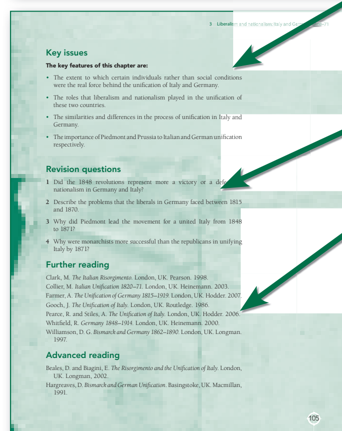
All chapters have a similar structure. They key features are as follows:



1. **Key questions** pose thought-provoking pointers to the key issues being dealt with in the chapter.
2. **Content summary** explains the essence of a chapter.
3. **Timeline** offers an overview of significant events of the period.



4. **Key figures** offer a detailed profile of key personalities.
5. **Notes** highlight significant points from within the text.
6. **Definitions** of key terms enhance students' understanding of the text.
7. **Questions** interspersed within the chapters help to consolidate learning.



8. **Key issues** outline the main aspects of the content that might be significant for exam preparation.
9. **Revision questions** help students assess their own understanding and skills.
10. **Further reading** provides a list of extra resources that will help with gaining a wider perspective of the topic.

Chapter

1 The French Revolution and Napoleon 1789–1804

Key questions

- What were the aims and domestic problems of French politicians in the early revolutionary years?
- Why were French governments so unstable up to 1799?
- Why did Napoleon Bonaparte rise to power by 1799?
- What were Napoleon Bonaparte's domestic aims from 1799 to 1804?

Content summary

- The situation in France before the French Revolution.
- The outbreak of the revolution and the reaction of Louis XVI.
- The counter-revolutionaries and the reasons for the king's execution in 1793.
- The rule and fall of Robespierre and the aims of the Jacobins.
- The Thermidorian Reaction and the aims and rule of the Directory.
- Napoleon Bonaparte's rise to power.
- Napoleon's government of France, including his domestic aims and reforms.
- The formation of the French Empire and Napoleon's reputation in other countries.

Timeline

Date	Event
May 1774	Accession of Louis XVI
Feb 1787	Assembly of Notables takes place
Jul 1789	Storming of the Bastille during the revolution
Aug 1789	Declaration of the Rights of Man adopted
Jul 1790	Civil Constitution of the Clergy passed
Jun 1791	Louis XVI's Flight to Varennes
Apr 1792	French Revolutionary Wars begin
Jan 1793	Louis XVI executed; Robespierre and the Jacobins take power
Jul 1794	Robespierre executed; fall of the Jacobins
Nov 1795	Directory established
Nov 1799	End of the Directory; Napoleon becomes first consul
Jul 1801	Concordat with the pope
Mar 1804	Civil Code (Napoleonic Code) comes into force
May 1804	Napoleon becomes 'Emperor of the French'

Introduction

At its outbreak in 1789, many people believed that the French Revolution marked the dawn of an age of freedom and equality in France. However, the period was characterised by mass killings, intolerance and, eventually, the rise of the powerful **dictator** Napoleon Bonaparte. In fact, those who initiated the revolution did so in the hope of introducing only moderate changes. They did not predict that their efforts would have such an extreme and dramatic conclusion – the execution of the king and the establishment of a **republic** in France.

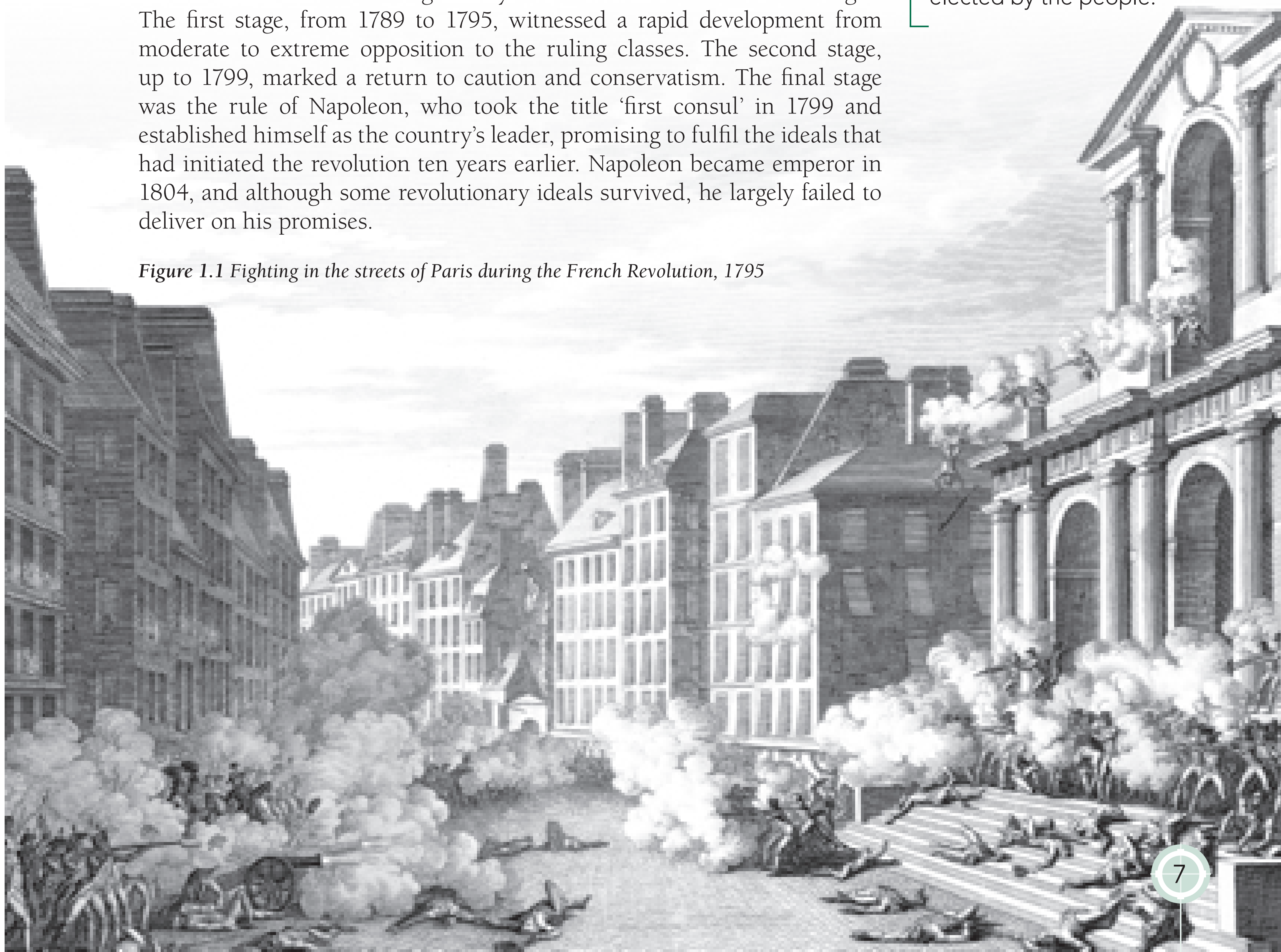
dictator
An absolute ruler who controls a country without democratic institutions.

republic
A form of government in which the head of state is not a monarch, and where supreme power usually lies with a group of citizens elected by the people.

During the course of the revolution there were widespread changes in just about every sphere of life in France. With the overthrow of the monarchy, the power of the nobility declined. The middle class gained in both wealth and influence, while the peasantry was freed from many of the burdens that it had formerly borne. At the same time, the Roman Catholic Church lost much of its religious monopoly and power.

The French Revolution is generally divided into three distinct stages. The first stage, from 1789 to 1795, witnessed a rapid development from moderate to extreme opposition to the ruling classes. The second stage, up to 1799, marked a return to caution and conservatism. The final stage was the rule of Napoleon, who took the title 'first consul' in 1799 and established himself as the country's leader, promising to fulfil the ideals that had initiated the revolution ten years earlier. Napoleon became emperor in 1804, and although some revolutionary ideals survived, he largely failed to deliver on his promises.

Figure 1.1 Fighting in the streets of Paris during the French Revolution, 1795



The aims and domestic problems of French politicians 1789–91

Long-term causes of the French Revolution

Before the French Revolution, France had been governed by a monarchy for most of its history. Indeed, the country was unique in Europe for the length of the reign of its kings – **Louis XIV** and **Louis XV** had governed France for more than 130 years between them (1643–1774). Their extended rule discouraged reform at a time of great change in the world beyond France.

The power of the king, the nobles and the Church

On the death of Louis XV in 1774, the throne passed to his grandson, **Louis XVI**. The new king was more enlightened than his predecessors had been, but the power and influence of the nobility remained strong, and few reforms could be implemented in the face of their resistance to change.

The king himself maintained considerable authority, and there were few limitations on the power of the monarch. Nobles enjoyed substantial privileges, including low taxes. Only a small middle class existed in France at the time, so the burden of taxes fell most heavily on the peasantry. Almost all French people followed the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, which gave this institution immense influence. The Church used its power to support the monarchy and to oppose any reforms that might challenge the dominance of the *ancien régime*.

Note:

The term *ancien régime* ('old order') refers to monarchical governments and their strictly hierarchical societies before the French Revolution (although some historians believe that elements of these regimes continued well after the revolution). It applies particularly to France, and covers the country's system of government and administration, the structure of its society, the role of its Church, and the nature of its dominant arts and ideas.

Regional divisions and financial troubles

France was a difficult country to govern, as different regions had particular and diverse customs. Most of the population identified themselves more with their region than their country. In addition, there were significant differences in language, culture and law between the north and south of France:

Key figures

Louis XIV (1638–1715)

Known as the 'Sun King', Louis XIV ruled France for over 72 years. He believed in the absolute power of the monarchy. His determination to make France the greatest country in Europe led to several major wars.

Louis XV (1710–74)

Louis XV showed little interest in government, instead pursuing his own pleasures. He was strongly influenced by the nobility, and refused to support reform. The historian G. P. Gooch commented that Louis XV's reputation suffered 'less from what he did than what he never tried to do'.

- The language of the south was different from the language of the north.
- Some towns and cities had traditional rights that they guarded jealously, such as appointing local officials and voting for some taxes.
- Laws issued by the king were not applied automatically, but had to be recorded by local institutions throughout France. There were different systems of law in the north and the south.

By 1789, the most urgent problem Louis XVI faced was his country's financial debt. Continuous wars had proved expensive, especially France's intervention on the side of the Americans in their War of Independence (1775–83). Some ministers, including Viscount Calonne and Jacques Necker, tried to introduce reforms that included plans to raise money by imposing higher taxes on the wealthy. However, they were defeated by powerful groups amongst the nobility and Church, who defended their privileges against these reforms. Despite his overall authority, tradition prevented the king from imposing higher taxes without the agreement of these influential institutions.

Like many countries in Europe, France was a largely agricultural economy. Poor harvests over several years resulted in food shortages and rising food prices – a situation that forced many French citizens into poverty and starvation. Discontent grew, and there were increasing calls for change. The apparent indifference of the king and the nobles to the suffering of the lower classes created a tension that contributed significantly to the outbreak of the revolution. The rigid and unsympathetic attitude of the king's wife, **Marie Antoinette**, also added to his increasing unpopularity. The queen was regarded as wantonly extravagant at a time when many people were facing extreme hardship.

The Enlightenment

Despite these entrenched conservative structures, there were some signs of change in France throughout the 18th century – especially with the rise of the Enlightenment. This movement favoured new ideas about government and the rights of citizens, and therefore had significant revolutionary potential. The importance of the Enlightenment as a cause of the French Revolution has been much debated by historians. Some have argued that by undermining institutions such as the Church, the Enlightenment threatened the monarchy and thus played a key role in encouraging rebellion.

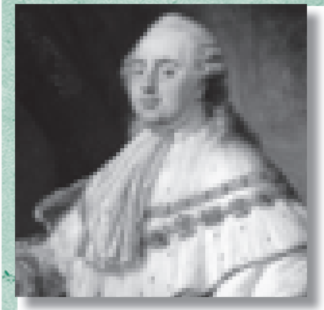
Note:

The Enlightenment was an intellectual movement that swept across Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries. Pioneered by thinkers and scientists such as Baruch Spinoza (1632–77), John Locke (1632–1704), Pierre Bayle (1647–1706), Isaac Newton (1643–1727) and Voltaire (1694–1778), the Enlightenment sought to place reason and science at the centre of human endeavour, pitting itself against religious irrationalism and superstition.

Key figures

Louis XVI (1754–93)

Louis XVI was a religious man with a reputation as a good husband and father. However, he was a weak and indecisive king. After the outbreak of the revolution, Louis accepted reforms only reluctantly, and his policies were confused. He was executed in January 1793.



Marie Antoinette (1755–93)

Marie Antoinette was the daughter of the Empress of Austria. Her marriage to the king was unpopular in France. When the French Revolution broke out, the queen pressed her husband to resist reform. She was executed in 1793, a few months after Louis XVI.

However, other historians have dismissed this as a romantic view, believing that practical issues such as taxation and the poor condition of the economy were the most significant causes of the revolution.

Short-term causes of the French Revolution

The main reason for the start of the revolution in 1789 was the refusal of the nobility to accept reforms that would interfere with their traditional privileges. In particular, there was friction over the French tax system, which imposed the heaviest taxes on the middle and working classes, while the upper classes and the nobility benefited from numerous tax exemptions and advantages. At a time when the French state was nearing bankruptcy from its involvement in expensive wars, this provoked widespread hostility.

In an effort to address the country's financial problems, Louis XVI agreed to call a meeting of the Estates General. This advisory assembly comprised representatives from the three classes, or 'estates', into which society was traditionally divided:

- **The First Estate:** the Church. Members in the Estates General were not ordinary clergy, but came from the upper levels of the Church hierarchy. These representatives were chosen informally by other clergy rather than being officially elected.
- **The Second Estate:** the nobility. Members of the Estates General were informally elected. A few nobles in the assembly were willing to embrace reform, but the majority resisted change.
- **The Third Estate:** everyone else. Although the majority of the Third Estate was made up of peasants, members of the Estates General were overwhelmingly from the middle class. Their demands therefore represented the interests of the middle class rather than the peasantry. The Third Estate sought change, but it did not aim to bring about revolution.

The king's decision to convene the Estates General in 1789 was a desperate measure. The assembly had last been called in 1614, and few people really understood either its procedures or the extent of its powers. Typically, each estate had the same number of votes in the Estates General. This meant that the Church and the nobility – traditional allies – could join forces to outvote the Third Estate and block any suggestion of reform. However, in 1789, the First Estate comprised 10,000 clergy and the Second Estate was made up of 400,000 nobles, while the Third Estate represented 25 million people. As such, the Third Estate demanded that voting should more fairly reflect the membership of the different classes. After three months of disputes, the Third Estate was eventually granted double its number of representatives in the Estates General, and the meeting began in May 1789.

Note:
Although some members of the Third Estate were convinced to participate in the Estates General after being granted double representation at the meeting, this turned out to be irrelevant. When it came to voting, the king upheld the traditional way that votes were counted – that is, the collective vote of each estate carried equal weight.

The start of the revolution

Louis XVI had ordered each of the three Estates to draw up a list of its grievances (called *cahiers*), which would be presented to the king and discussed at the meeting. All three groups agreed on certain matters, including the need for a constitution, liberty of the press and an end to **internal trade barriers**. However, there were many more issues on which they could not agree. Most importantly, the First and Second Estates refused to surrender their taxation privileges. The king himself proved his lack of leadership ability during the discussions, offering weak support to the First and Second Estates, but failing to take any firm decisions or enforce his own will. It quickly became clear that the situation was deadlocked.

internal trade barriers Restrictions imposed by a government on the exchange of goods and services within a particular country.

Figure 1.2 *A painting showing the opening of the meeting of the Estates General in 1789*

The National Assembly and the Tennis Court Oath

As a result of this impasse, representatives of the Third Estate decided to break away from the Estates General and form an independent assembly that would more fairly address the demands of the lower classes. Some clergy and nobles who favoured reform also joined this group, which called itself the National Constituent Assembly.

Although the National Assembly claimed to be working in favour of the king as well as the people, Louis XVI was angered by what he perceived to be a challenge to his royal authority. Urged on by his family and other advisors, on 19 June 1789 the king ordered that the hall in which the Assembly met should be locked. Armed guards were posted at the door and members were denied entry. Louis resolved to reassert his power by overturning the decisions made by the Assembly and dictating the few reforms that would be implemented.

Note:
The National Constituent Assembly was formed on 9 July 1789. It was dissolved just two years later, in September 1791. The group is alternatively referred to as the Constituent Assembly or the National Assembly.

Key figure

Honoré Gabriel Riqueti, Count of Mirabeau (1749–91)

Mirabeau was born into the nobility, but was disowned by his family after several scandals in his youth. He was a leader of the National Assembly, and fought for the rights of the lower classes. However, his revolutionary ideals were moderate and he favoured a constitutional monarchy (in which the king's powers would be limited). After the revolution broke out, he secretly acted as advisor to Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette – a fact that destroyed his reputation among the French people when it became known after his death in 1791.

Turned away from their meeting-place, members of the Assembly instead convened at a tennis court in the Saint-Louis district of Versailles on 20 June. There, 576 members swore an oath not to disperse until a new constitution for France had been established. The 'Tennis Court Oath', as it became known, was a significant moment in the history of the French Revolution. It was the first act of defiance against the king – and the first demonstration that decisions about the government of the country could be made by the people. Such defiance was exemplified by **Honoré Gabriel Riqueti, Count of Mirabeau**, a nobleman who supported the cause of the Third Estate and joined the National Assembly. Mirabeau declared: 'We shall not stir from our places save at the point of a bayonet.'

The storming of the Bastille

There were fears that Louis XVI would bring in the army to crush this unofficial gathering of the National Assembly. As a result, many French citizens flocked to the centre of Paris to show support for this new political movement that defended the rights of the people. Violence broke out and, on 14 July 1789, one of the first major actions of the revolution took place when crowds in Paris stormed the Bastille in an attempt to seize the guns and ammunition being stored there, to use against the king's soldiers. All those defending the building were killed.

Figure 1.3 A map of Paris in 1789

Note:
The Bastille was a fortress and prison in Paris, and was considered a symbol of the tyranny of the *ancien régime*, although at the time of its 'storming' in 1789 it housed only seven prisoners and was more important as a weapons and ammunition store. Bastille Day is still remembered every year on 14 July – a national day of celebration for the French.

The fighting grew steadily more intense. The citizens had become hardened to the gunfire. From all directions they clambered onto the roof of the Bastille or broke into the rooms. As soon as an enemy appeared among the turrets on the tower, he was fixed in the sights of a hundred guns and mown down in an instant. Meanwhile cannon fire was hurriedly directed against the inner drawbridge, which it pierced. In vain did the cannon on the tower reply, for most people were sheltered from it. People bravely faced death and every danger. Women, in their eagerness, helped us to the utmost; even the children ran here and there picking up the bullets. And so the Bastille fell and the governor, De Launey, was captured. Blessed liberty has at last been introduced into this place of horrors, this frightful refuge of monstrous despotism. De Launey was struck by a thousand blows, his head was cut off and hoisted on the end of a pike with blood streaming down all sides. The other officers were killed. This glorious day must amaze our enemies, and finally bring in for us the triumph of justice and liberty. In the evening, there were celebrations.

An extract from a French newspaper describing the fall of the Bastille, 14 July 1789.

Figure 1.4 *The capture of the Bastille fortress on 14 July 1789*

Note:
The *sans-culottes* were named after the type of clothes common to the workers and craftsmen in French cities, especially Paris. They wore plain trousers rather than expensive knee-breeches (*culottes*), which were the fashion among the wealthier classes.

One of the most radical groups in Paris at the start of (and indeed throughout) the revolution were the so-called *sans-culottes*. These working-class revolutionaries demanded democracy and equality, and were willing to resort to violence to achieve their aims. Amidst rumours that the king would overthrow the revolution, panic spread from Paris to the provinces and peasants began to riot. They seized property from landlords and stole food from stores; records with lists of services and taxes to be paid by the peasants were also destroyed. As the revolution gained momentum across France, some nobles – the *émigrés* (emigrants) – fled abroad to try to persuade other European monarchies to lend support in putting down the rebellion.

The August Decrees and the Declaration of the Rights of Man

The following month, the National Assembly issued the August Decrees – a series of new laws that effectively brought about the end of **feudalism** in France and granted many more rights to peasants and workers. The nobility agreed to abolish compulsory service by peasants, including unpaid work to repair roads, and to abandon the taxes that peasants usually had to pay their landlords at harvest time. The decrees also abolished law courts run by the nobility. In addition, the Church gave up the right to collect payments from the rest of the population, which had previously added greatly to its wealth.

feudalism
A system of social organisation that prevailed in Europe between the 9th and 15th centuries, but which persisted in some parts of the continent until the 19th century. In essence, feudalism relied on people holding land in return for service or labour to a wealthy landowner, placing them in a position of servitude.

On 26 August 1789, the Assembly issued the Declaration of the Rights of Man. This document was based on the American Declaration of Independence and was the first step in establishing a constitution for France. It stated that:

- all men were born free and had the rights of equality, liberty, security and property
- imprisonment without trial would be banned
- taxation was to be fairly apportioned to all people based on their wealth
- sovereignty lay with the people; no individual or group should be allowed to make decisions that went against the will of the people.

Louis XVI believed that the problems were temporary, but accepted the changes to prevent further disorder. However, unrest continued. A march headed by several thousand women went to Versailles and forced the royal family to return to Paris. Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette were greeted with cheers on their return, but the king now had to acknowledge formally the reforms introduced by the Assembly. A foreign ambassador reported that France was ruled by the Paris mob.

The situation by the end of 1789

The counter-revolutionaries (the people who opposed the revolution) included the king and the rest of the royal family, as well as almost all the nobility and the higher clergy. Outside France, several foreign governments

also opposed the revolution – they were afraid that if it succeeded there, rebellion might break out in their own countries. Paris was the centre of revolutionary enthusiasm, and although the movement quickly gained a following in other parts of the country, support was not universal among the lower classes. In fact, in strongly Catholic regions such as Brittany and the Vendée in the far west, many people remained loyal to the Catholic king.

Even amongst the counter-revolutionaries there were divisions. The most hardline of them thought that the king should refuse to accept any changes to the way France was governed, and were determined to restore the *ancien régime* (see page 8) as swiftly as possible. More moderate counter-revolutionaries felt that certain reforms were reasonable and believed that the king should accept some limits on his power. However, they could not agree on the extent of these changes. The counter-revolutionaries looked to the king for leadership, but Louis was indecisive and failed to take a firm stand. As a result, those who opposed the revolution were not well-organised and had no clear programme of action for suppressing the rebellion and regaining control.

The revolutionaries also lacked strong leadership and a clear agenda for reform. The lower classes had many grievances against the *ancien régime*, but their remedies for the situation were vague at best. The people of France demanded equality, liberty, security and land ownership, but offered no detail about exactly what this meant or how it should be implemented. For some months after the royal family was brought to Paris from Versailles, the revolution moved uncertainly.

The situation required someone to act as an intermediary between the king and the revolutionaries. At first it seemed that the Count of Mirabeau (see page 12) might suit this role, but although Mirabeau was popular with the people, the king and his court distrusted him. Another moderate nobleman, **Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de Lafayette**, was suggested, but he expressed little enthusiasm for representing the demands of the more radical revolutionaries. Consequently, little progress was made by either side in the first months of the revolution.

The Civil Constitution 1790

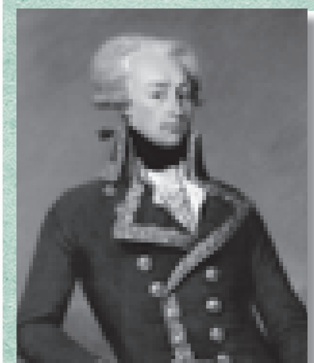
As a symbol of the *ancien régime*, the Church naturally became a target for reformers. Some monasteries were dissolved and the Church's right to raise taxes was abolished, but these reforms were not controversial and leading clergy did not protest or appeal to the pope for support. However, in July 1790, the Assembly introduced a much more radical law – the Civil Constitution of the Clergy:

- The pope was deprived of his authority over the Church in France. He could no longer appoint archbishops and bishops (or, as a consequence, any clergy that served under them). Instead, bishops and parish clergy were to be elected by state officials.

Key figure

Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de Lafayette (1757–1834)

Lafayette was a French nobleman. He led the French soldiers who supported the American War of Independence, and returned as a national hero. When the French Revolution broke out, he favoured moderate reform and helped draw up the Declaration of the Rights of Man. However, he later came into conflict with the more radical revolutionaries, was arrested and spent five years in prison. Lafayette was released when Napoleon came to power.



- The number of bishoprics (districts or dioceses under the control of a bishop) was reduced.
- Some Church offices were abolished.
- The clergy were to be paid by the Church rather than the state, and their role was to be exclusively religious.

Even at this point, most clergymen supported the reforms, and Louis XVI accepted the Civil Constitution. However, the situation changed when the Assembly added a requirement for the clergy to sign an oath of loyalty to the Constitution. For many, this was a step too far. Only seven bishops and half the parish clergy agreed to take this oath. The pope publicly condemned not only the Civil Constitution but also all the revolutionary reforms that had been introduced. The French people were split between those who supported the Civil Constitution and its revolutionary principles, and those who remained faithful to the Church's traditional role in society.

The Flight to Varennes 1791

As the revolution continued, rumours began to circulate that the king was intending to seek safety abroad. So far, Louis had resisted advice to flee France – partly because he believed it was wrong for a king to abandon his

country in time of trouble, but also because he was afraid that if he deserted his throne, another royalist might take over in his absence. However, by 1791 the situation had changed. The pope's condemnation of the revolution stirred up further violence and the king had been largely unsuccessful in suppressing unrest across the country. Foreign monarchs – including Marie Antoinette's royal relations in Austria – had expressed disapproval of the developments taking place in France, but no one had offered any practical help in putting down the revolution. Louis felt that if he could escape abroad, he might be able to gather support more effectively.

On the night of 20 June 1791, therefore, Louis XVI and his family fled Paris. They set out for the royalist town of Montmédy, on the border with Luxembourg. There they hoped to be met by Austrian troops sent by Marie Antoinette's family. However, the flight was poorly organised and the disguises used by the king and his family were unconvincing. Their coach was halted at Varennes, 50 km (30 miles) from the border. The king and queen were arrested and taken back to Paris under heavy guard. They remained there until their executions in 1793.

Figure 1.5 *Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette are arrested during the Flight to Varennes in 1791*

Questions

1. What do you think was the most significant reason for the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789?
2. Could the king, Louis XVI, have prevented the revolution from breaking out? Were there any points at which he could have halted its progress?
3. Why did the French Revolution lack a single leader?
4. In the extract from the French newspaper report of the storming of the Bastille on page 13, the writer refers to 'justice and liberty'. What specific social changes might he be referring to in these terms?
5. Source A below lists some of the accusations made against Louis XVI at his trial in 1792. How do these accusations compare to your own views on the primary causes of the French Revolution?

Source A

Louis, the French people accuse you of having committed a multitude of crimes in order to establish your tyranny by destroying its liberty …

You attacked the sovereignty of the people by suspending the assemblies of its representatives and by driving them by violence from the place of their sessions …

You caused an army to march against the citizens of Paris and caused their blood to flow. You withdrew this army only when the capture of the Bastille and the general uprising showed you that the people were victorious …

For a long time you contemplated flight and you made your escape as far as Varennes with a false passport …

You apparently accepted the new Constitution. Your speeches announced a desire to maintain it, but you worked to overthrow it before it was achieved …

Your brothers, enemies of the state, have rallied the émigrés. They have raised regiments, borrowed money, and formed alliances in your name …

You allowed the French nation to be disgraced in Germany, in Italy, and in Spain, since you did nothing to exact compensation for the ill treatment which the French experienced in those countries.

You caused the blood of Frenchmen to flow.

Adapted from the accusations made against King Louis XVI at his trial, 11 December 1792.

The instability of French governments 1791–99

In 1789, Louis XVI convened the Estates General, beginning a period of instability in France. In July the same year, the Estates General adopted the name the National Assembly as a sign of the authority that it claimed (see page 11). The Assembly lasted only two years, until 1791, when popular pressure forced it to call elections for a National Convention – an organisational structure that became official in 1792. The Convention soon came under the influence of its leading Jacobin members; the Committee of Public Safety was set up, dominated by the Jacobins (see page 20) and their leader Maximilien Robespierre. By 1795, a reaction against the Jacobins led to the fall of the Convention, the introduction of a new constitution, and the establishment of the Directory. All the governments during this period attempted to bring their own revolutionary aims to the fore, but all faced a variety of challenges.

Economic problems

Economic problems had been a major reason for the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789, and these troubles continued into the 1790s. The state's debts remained, and so did the inefficient system for collecting taxes. Farmers began hoarding their grain rather than distributing it. The Assembly in Paris outlawed this practice, but it continued nonetheless, and food became scarce. **Assignats** were issued, but their value fell sharply as people lost confidence in the currency. As the revolution spread, the situation improved for members of the middle class, who could afford to buy land that had been seized from the nobility and the Church. However, those without any wealth at all – the peasants and the working classes in the towns and cities – suffered greatly. These problems were made worse by divisions amongst the revolutionaries. While moderates objected to the seizure of property and food, radicals demanded complete state control over them.

assignats
Paper money used instead of coins and guaranteed by the government. The value of this type of currency depended on people's confidence in it and their willingness to accept it as payment for goods.

The start of the Revolutionary Wars

In addition to internal disagreements, the revolutionaries faced a serious threat from abroad. The monarchies of Europe regarded Louis XVI as the rightful ruler of France, and were outraged by his arrest and imprisonment. The ideals of the revolution – reflected in the Declaration of the Rights of Man (see page 14) – threatened the peace in their own countries. Austria and Prussia, the strongest powers in central Europe, were particularly alarmed by the reforms. As French émigrés began gathering support in these countries, the National Assembly decided to declare war on Austria in 1792. The Duke of Brunswick, commander of the combined Austrian and Prussian forces, issued a manifesto defending an invasion of France and promising to restore Louis XVI to his full powers. Britain and Holland soon joined this anti-revolutionary alliance.

> **Key figure**
>
> **Lazare Nicolas Marguerite, Count Carnot (1753–1823)**
>
> Count Carnot was an engineer and mathematician before moving into politics during the French Revolution. His idea of introducing conscription resulted in the French army increasing from 650,000 soldiers to 1.5 million in little more than a year. Carnot also arranged for sufficient weapons and food for this large force. He became known as the 'Organiser of Victory'.

Most French army officers had been dismissed or had fled the country as royalists, and this left the French forces weak and lacking in strong leadership. When Prussian troops crossed the border and began marching on Paris, it seemed that the revolution might be crushed at last and the monarchy restored. On the advice of **Lazare Nicolas Marguerite, Count Carnot**, the Jacobin government increased French forces through conscription, and they won a surprising victory at the Battle of Valmy in September 1792. However, the danger to the revolution was not over, and there were fears of treason when Charles-François du Périer Dumouriez, a leading general, deserted and joined the Austrians. Such events only served to further weaken the government.

The rise of the radicals

From 1791, the government grew divided by suspicion. The more radical elements in the Assembly accused the moderates (the Feuillants) of collaborating with the king. In September 1791, a new constitution was introduced and the National Assembly was replaced by a new body called the Legislative Assembly. This allowed the radicals, especially the Jacobins and the Girondins (see below), to gain more influence. The 1791 Constitution benefited the middle class, but the *sans-culottes* in Paris (see page 14) and similar lower-class mobs in the provinces maintained disruptive powers that could not be ignored. The instability in the revolutionary government was shown when the Legislative Assembly was replaced by another ruling body, the Convention, just a few months later.

The Girondins and the Jacobins

The two leading radical groups during the French Revolution were the Girondins and the Jacobins. The Girondins were originally from the south of France. They supported the rights of the provinces to influence the revolutionary movement and were therefore opposed by those who regarded Paris as the centre of the revolution, including the *sans-culottes*. The Jacobins formed in Paris, although Jacobin clubs were later organised in the provinces, too. At the start of the revolution the Jacobins were relatively moderate in their demands, but they soon became more extreme.

> **Note:**
> The Jacobins were named after the place they held their early meetings – a convent in Rue St Jacques in Paris. They were also sometimes called the Montagnards ('Mountain People'), because they sat in the higher level of seats during debates in the Assembly.

The Girondins and the Jacobins were united by a hatred of the Church and a desire to end upper-class privilege. However, after the Flight to Varennes, the Girondins continued to encourage negotiation with Louis XVI – a policy that was not popular with other revolutionary groups. As a result, the Girondins lost both power and influence; many of them were arrested and some were even executed. This left power almost exclusively in the hands of the Jacobins and their influential leader **Maximilien Robespierre**.

The Jacobins had several priorities:

- **The fate of the king:** all the revolutionaries distrusted Louis XVI, but there was disagreement about what should be done with him. Some favoured further negotiation in the hope of reaching an agreement, but the Jacobins called for his execution.
- **The threat from royalist sympathisers within France:** the Jacobins used a policy of terror against anybody suspected of being a danger to the revolution (see below).
- **Progress in the Revolutionary Wars:** the fight against Austria and Prussia (and later Britain) went badly for France at first, but the Jacobins used Carnot's army and turned the tide. They were helped in this by a lack of effective co-operation between the opposing forces, which fought as individual units rather than a cohesive army. Eventually, the French revolutionary army was even able to take the initiative against Austria and Prussia.
- **The severe economic conditions within France:** problems increased rather than diminished after the outbreak of the revolution. As the administration collapsed, fewer people paid taxes. It was almost impossible to obtain loans from financiers. An absence of law and order affected trade and caused scarcities. The war was expensive.

The Reign of Terror

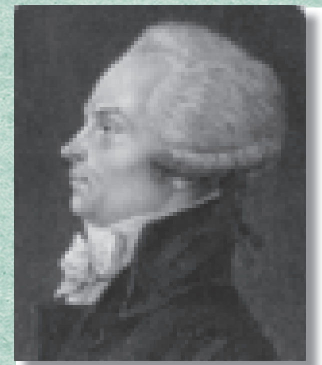
One of the first steps the Jacobins took once they had control of the Convention was establishing the Committee of Public Safety. This was given extensive powers to supervise military and legal affairs, and was dominated by the most hardline Jacobins under the leadership of Robespierre himself.

Between 1792 and 1794, the Jacobins used the Reign of Terror to consolidate their power. Robespierre set up a Revolutionary Tribunal in Paris to put on trial anyone suspected of being an 'enemy of the revolution'. Local committees serving a similar purpose also sprang up in the provinces, although these were often unofficial. In September 1792, a massacre of prisoners in Paris was carried out, in which more than 1000 people were killed. The justification for this was that the prisoners were conspiring to rise up and join a counter-revolutionary plot. However, although some of them were noblemen and clergy, many were common criminals with no political agenda.

Key figure

Maximilien Robespierre (1758–94)

The lawyer Robespierre was elected to the Estates General in 1789 as a member of the Third Estate. He was strongly critical of the monarchy and was one of the first to suggest that the king should be put on trial and that France should become a republic. Robespierre has become inextricably linked to the period known as the 'Reign of Terror', in which thousands of people were executed for opposing the revolution. He was eventually arrested and executed in July 1794.



> **Note:**
> Even in late 1792, it was not inevitable that Louis XVI would lose his life. There were still moderate revolutionaries who argued against his execution. They believed that the king's death would only increase the divisions between factions in France and strengthen the determination of foreign powers to intervene in the revolution.

The execution of the king

On 21 September 1792, a decree was passed that abolished the monarchy and proclaimed a republic in France. The king was put on trial and sent to the guillotine in January 1793. (Marie Antoinette met the same fate in October that year.) In celebration of a new era, a new calendar was introduced – the months were renamed and 1792 was designated Year I.

Figure 1.6 The execution of Louis XVI on 21 January 1793

Robespierre's cult

Robespierre himself was a man of high morality. He called for a 'Republic of Virtue' to replace Roman Catholicism, emphasising duty, the need for all citizens to help each other and a loyalty to democracy. Previous revolutionary leaders had curbed the power of the Church, but few had attacked Christianity itself. Robespierre now introduced the Cult of the Supreme Being to replace the worship of the Christian God. He himself led one of the ceremonial processions to introduce the cult.

Paris and many other large cities strongly supported extremist Jacobin rule, but agents sent from Paris by the Committee of Public Safety were not popular everywhere. There were still some members of the nobility who had not fled abroad, and they became the focus of loyalist activity. The clergy also commanded support in parts of the country where moderates or royalists remained dominant. The Jacobin agents sent to uncover and suppress anti-revolutionary feeling were ruthless, but their task was not an easy one.

Note:
The *sans-culottes* were the best known of the extremist groups acting in both Paris and the provinces, but several other groups emerged to enforce revolutionary law throughout the country. These included the *enragés* ('wild men'), *bras-nus* ('bare-armed') and *canaille* ('rabble').

The Law of Suspects

By September 1793, the Jacobins were facing several crises. Most significantly, the port of Toulon in the south was besieged by the British; if it fell, it would open up a base for counter-revolutionaries to make inroads into France. In response, the Convention passed a decree known as the Law of Suspects, which allowed people to be arrested on the basis of accusation rather than evidence. Guilt was defined in vague terms so that anybody who was not an active supporter of the regime could be charged. The accused were not allowed lawyers, and were tried in special tribunals presided over by Jacobin agents rather than judges. The only possible outcomes were acquittal or death.

Some historians claim that the Reign of Terror was a class war waged against the peasantry and the lower orders in the towns and cities. Certainly, victims of the Terror were not just aristocrats and clergymen. Members of the middle class also found themselves on trial, and many innocent people were sent to the guillotine simply because their accusers wanted to impress the authorities by their revolutionary zeal. It is estimated that around 40,000 people were killed during the Reign of Terror. Some believe this was necessary to ensure the survival of the revolution, and point to the fact that this violence was moderate compared to that carried out by 20th-century dictators such as Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin. However, the Reign of Terror shocked 18th-century Europe by its scale and lack of respect for legal institutions.

The fall of Robespierre

As the Reign of Terror swept through France, other revolutionary groups grew alarmed by just how extreme the Jacobins had become. In particular, the Law of Suspects was widely regarded as a step too far. As success in the Revolutionary Wars reduced the threat from abroad, some groups within France felt that the time was right to challenge Robespierre's rule. The disorder persuaded many people, even in Paris, that Robespierre was too dictatorial. The Committee of Public Safety was becoming overly powerful – ignoring the Convention – and the Committee itself was divided. The Jacobins were falling apart. Robespierre made plans to purge the Committee, but the Convention decided to act against him in what became known as the Thermidorian Reaction. Robespierre was arrested in 1794, and 80,000 prisoners were released from jail. After a failed suicide attempt, Robespierre was executed on 28 July 1794; around 90 of his colleagues were also killed.

Note:
The Thermidorian Reaction was named after Thermidor, the month in the new French Revolution calendar in which Robespierre fell from power.

Robespierre remains a controversial historical figure. Some commentators believe that he saved the revolution from defeat at a critical time. Others condemn the dictatorial nature of his rule and the executions that took place under his leadership. On a personal level, Robespierre was also a man of contradictions. He was known as 'The Incorruptible' and was highly principled. He firmly believed that power belonged to the people and not to governments. However, he proved himself to be a ruthless politician and would not tolerate rivals even among his fellow Jacobins, many of whom he sent to the guillotine.

We want a state of affairs where all unworthy and cruel passions are unknown, and all kind and generous passions are aroused by the laws. Ambition becomes the desire to deserve glory and to serve the fatherland. The citizen submits to the magistrate, the magistrate to the people and the people to justice. The fatherland guarantees the well-being of each individual, and where each individual enjoys with pride the prosperity and glory of the fatherland. Commerce is the source of public wealth and not only of the monstrous riches of a few people.

In our country we want to substitute morality for selfishness, honesty for honour, the rule of reason for the tyranny of tradition, the contempt of vice for the contempt of misfortune, love of glory instead of love of money, good people instead of the advantages of birth, a generous, powerful, happy people instead of despicable people – that is to say, all the virtues and all the miracles of the Republic for all the vices and all the absurdities of the monarchy.

What kind of government can realize these marvels? Only a democratic or republican government.

Jacobin leader Maximilien Robespierre, in a speech explaining his 'Republic of Virtue'.

Historical debate

One of the main areas of debate about the French Revolution concerns Maximilien Robespierre. Historians disagree about whether he was a tyrant, seeking only to fulfil his own ambitions, or whether he took extreme steps in the interests of justice for the common people of France. Below are two views of Robespierre's policies.

Source A

From the standpoint of the subordinated and oppressed, the very existence of a state is a fact of violence in the same sense in which, for example, Robespierre said … that one does not have to prove that the king committed any specific crimes, since the very existence of the king is a crime, an offence against the freedom of the people. In this strict sense, every violence of the oppressed against the ruling class and its state is ultimately 'defensive'.

Historian Sophie Wahlich, In Defence of the Terror, *2012.*

Source B

For the first time in history terror became an official government policy, with the stated aim to use violence in order to achieve a higher political goal. Unlike the later meaning of 'terrorists' as people who use violence against a government, the terrorists of the French Revolution were the government.

Historian Marisa Linton criticises Robespierre as a terrorist, in 'Robespierre and the Terror', History Today, *Vol. 56, Issue 8.*

The Directory 1795

The death of Robespierre marked the end of the most bloodthirsty period of the revolution and the start of a move away from the extremism that had characterised Jacobin rule. The Convention drew up a new constitution in August 1795. In order to balance power and avoid the dictatorship of one man or one group, the Directory was established, which had two councils:

- The Council of Five Hundred (with 500 members) proposed laws.
- The Council of Ancients (with 250 members) accepted or rejected the proposed laws.

In addition, there were five directors, who were selected by the Ancients from a list drawn up by the Five Hundred. They were responsible for choosing government ministers, army leaders, tax collectors and other officials. The directors and those who supported them came from the middle class, which had gained from the revolution – acquiring land and benefiting from trade. Now these men wanted to make sure they did not lose such advantages. Although they made money from their positions in the new government, claims that the directors were totally corrupt are probably exaggerated.

Note:
The Directory has received less attention from historians than the early stages of the French Revolution and the later rule of Napoleon Bonaparte. Some historians believe that the French Revolution really ended in 1794 with the death of Robespierre, but others point to the continuing work of the Directory in building on the positive reforms that had been introduced since 1789.

The Directory faced considerable problems. The treasury was empty and the government was almost bankrupt. The continuing war with foreign monarchies was expensive. Although the Reign of Terror was over, factions still existed within France, and royalists, Jacobins and moderate republicans continued to fight for their own agendas. In fact, these internal divisions helped the Directory to survive – the lack of co-operation between other political groups meant that none of them was strong enough to challenge the new government.

Importantly, the Directory had the support of the army. If the royalists won back control of France, the war against Austria would end and many soldiers would be unemployed. The Directory also needed the army to put down the uprisings carried out by dissatisfied groups. The government could not escape the opposition of the Jacobins and other radicals, who believed that members of the Directory had betrayed the revolution. Anger against the government increased after a severe winter in 1795–96 led to a shortage of food. Riots broke out and there were calls for the 1795 Constitution – by which the Directory ruled – to be abolished. The Directory called on the army to suppress the revolts and the National Guard, formerly a focus of lower-class agitation, was re-formed to bring it under control.

The Jacobins were not yet defeated, though, and in 1796 they launched a plot to overthrow the Directory and replace it with a 'Republic of Equals'. The Babeuf Plot (named after one of its leaders, Gracchus Babeuf) was well organised. The rebels issued a newspaper to spread their ideas and gather support, and began stockpiling weapons in preparation for the fight ahead. However, police spies uncovered the plot and the Jacobin leaders were arrested. Babeuf was executed.

People of France:

Never before has a vaster plan been conceived of or carried out. Here and there a few men of genius, a few men, have spoken in a low and trembling voice. None have had the courage to tell the whole truth.

The moment for great measures has arrived. Evil has reached its height: it covers the face of the Earth. In the name of politics, chaos has reigned for too many centuries. Let everything be set in order and take its proper place once again. Let the supporters of justice and happiness organise in the voice of equality. The moment has come to found the REPUBLIC OF EQUALS, this great home open to all men. The day of general restitution has arrived. Groaning families, come sit at the common table set by nature for all its children.

An extract from the 'Manifesto of the Equals', issued by the Jacobin plotters in 1796.

Although the Babeuf plot failed and the Directory survived, by 1797 it was becoming isolated. Having excluded both extreme wings of opinion (royalists and Jacobins), it now began to lose the support of the moderates, too, mainly due to its reliance on the army.

Successive elections saw the return of critics into the ranks of the Directory, including **Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès**.

The rise of Napoleon and the fall of the Directory 1799

The Directory pursued an active foreign policy, partly to satisfy the army and partly to win popular support. Two armies were sent against Austria, one in the north and one in the south to attack Austrian-controlled parts of Italy. The southern army was led by a young commander called Napoleon Bonaparte, whose outstanding success in the Italian campaign cemented his reputation and brought him to wide public attention in France.

After his victories against Austria, Napoleon was encouraged to lead an expedition to Egypt. The government hoped to weaken Britain's influence in the Mediterranean, but an underlying motive for this campaign was to keep Napoleon out of France, where his popularity made him a threat. In fact, this plan backfired, as although he was defeated in Egypt he was still welcomed back to France in triumph.

Key figure

Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès (1748–1836)

Sieyès was a priest and a politician during the French Revolution. He criticised the privileges of the Church and the nobility, and supported the Third Estate in the 1789 Estates General. Sieyès disliked the 1795 Constitution and at first refused to serve in the Directory. However, he was so popular that he eventually gave in to pressure and became a director. Despite this, he believed that the government was inefficient and self-serving, and he helped Napoleon come to power in 1799. He was made one of the three consuls (see page 28), but he resigned in protest when Napoleon declared himself emperor in 1804.

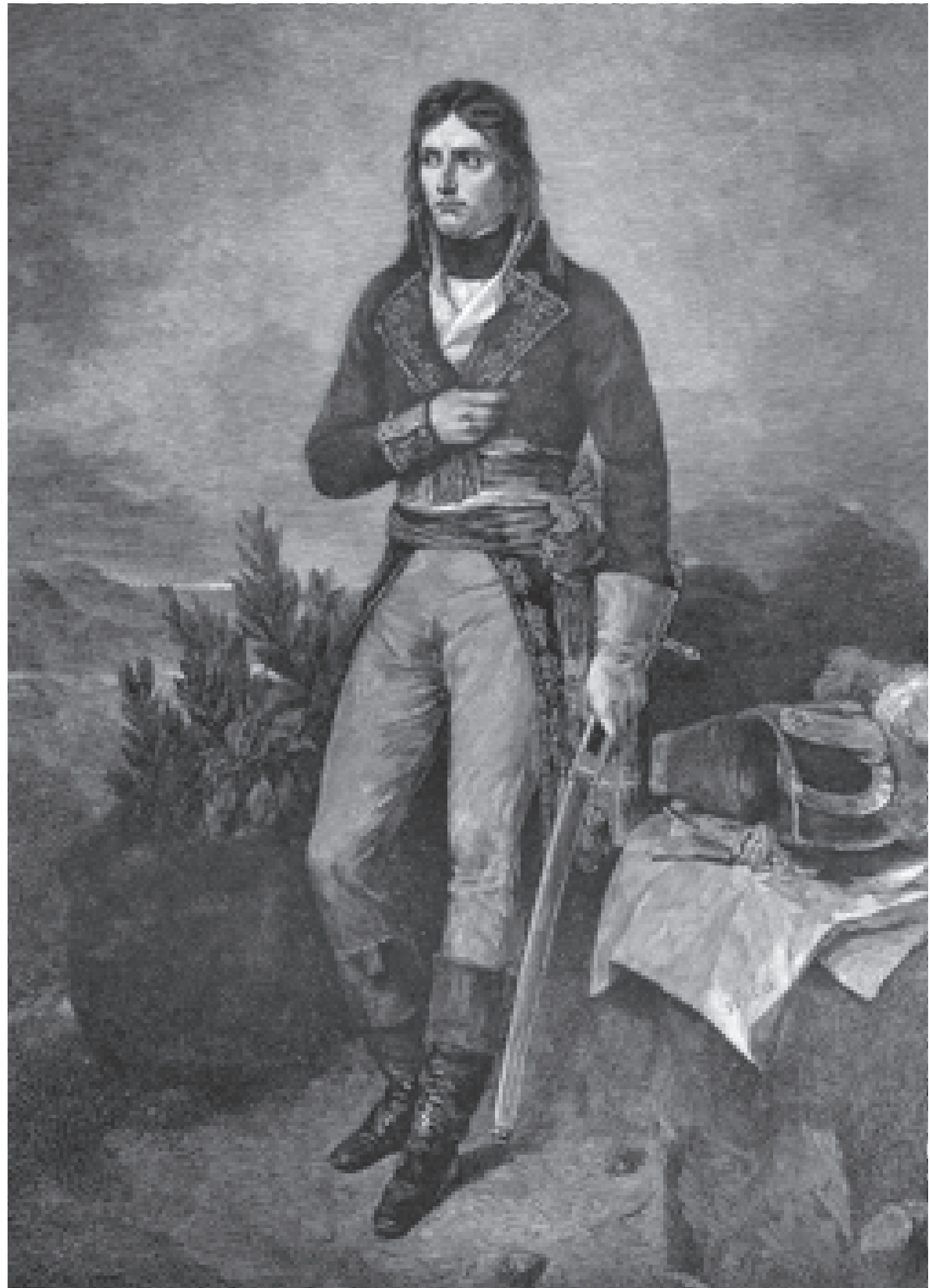


Figure 1.7 Napoleon Bonaparte as general of the army in Italy in 1795

By 1799, the Directory was in disarray. The directors were plotting against each other and against other groups, and Napoleon himself had ambitions to play a political role. Together with two of the directors, he proposed several changes to the 1795 Constitution. When these were rejected by the Directory's Council, Napoleon called on his loyal soldiers to impose his will. On 9 November 1799, he staged a coup and overthrew the Directory. In its place, he established the Consulate, with himself the chief of the three consuls who now controlled France.

I hid myself from the people, because I knew that when the moment came, curiosity to see me would bring them running after me. Everyone was caught in my nets and when I became head of state there was not a party in France that did not build some special hope on my success.

Napoleon Bonaparte, describing his actions during the coup of 1799.

How important was the French Revolution?

The period of radical and violent revolution in France lasted only ten years, but this short period of history does not reflect its importance. Louis XVI was executed in 1793, and although kings from his family ruled from 1814 to 1848, the restoration of the monarchy was short-lived. France became a republic again and remains so today. Thus, Robespierre and the Jacobins laid the foundations of modern France. The influence of the nobility in France ended. Nobles retained their titles but they no longer dominated the politics, economy and society of France.

Indirectly, the French Revolution affected the political systems in other European countries. Absolute monarchies continued for some years, but the French Revolution launched a wave of democratic forces that eventually brought about change. Absolute rulers survived in some states – for example, in southern Italy – but only until the middle of the 19th century. The exception to this was Russia, where the Romanov family of tsars retained absolute authority until the 1917 Revolution (see Chapter 5).

In France, the revolution benefited the middle class more than other groups. Members of this class gained from land transfers and from changes in trade. The Directory and Napoleon, as well as later governments, took pains to win the support of these people. Peasants were freed from feudal obligations and Church taxes, but neither they nor the poor who lived in towns gained political power until the late 19th century.

Questions

1. What do you think were the three most significant turning points in the course of the French Revolution between 1789 and 1799? Give reasons for your choices.
2. What had the revolution achieved by 1799?
3. With reference to the historical debate on page 25, which view of Robespierre do you find most convincing?