

# French Revolution historiography

The French Revolution was an event of great historical significance. Its ideas and outcomes shaped not just the development of France but the history of Europe. Because of its significance, the French Revolution has been studied by hundreds of historians. Few historical periods or events have been studied more and been interpreted so differently. As a consequence, the historiography of the revolution is complex and contains many different perspectives or schools of thought.

Any student or historian who seeks an understanding of the French Revolution and its contrasting perspectives faces a number of challenges. This article contains a brief introduction to French Revolution historiography. It is a summary of how different historians and movements have interpreted the revolution over time, not a comprehensive or rigorous discussion.

## The first historians

The first interpretations of the French Revolution were written as the revolution itself was unfolding.

Perhaps the best-known contemporary accounts of the revolution was penned by Anglo-Irish politician and philosopher **Edmund Burke** (1729-1797). In late 1790, Burke published an extended essay called *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Burke criticized the developments in France, condemning the revolution to fail and predicting – correctly, as it turned out – that it would end in tyranny and violence. Burke was a conservative and believed that political change must be cautious, considered and well-founded. He viewed political systems as organisms that must grow and evolve slowly. As a consequence, Burke favored moderate and cautious reforms that did not threaten or weaken the foundations of government and society. In *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke claimed the unfolding changes in France were too radical and ambitious; they made changes that could not be sustained and unleashed forces that could not be controlled. In Burke's view, the development of the revolution was too spontaneous, too disordered, lacking in leadership and devoid of planning. The French Revolution was not based on rational principles, Burke argued, so it would deteriorate into anarchy.

A contrasting contemporary view can be found in the writings of **Thomas Paine** (1737-1809). A Briton who emigrated to Pennsylvania, North America in 1774, he became a political journalist and a revolutionary himself. Paine contributed to the development of the American Revolution with powerfully worded essays that encapsulated revolutionary ideas. Paine's 1776 essay *Common Sense* used plain but forceful language to rationalise ideas like republicanism, representative government and American independence. Paine's *Common Sense* had a similar effect in America as Emmanuel Sieyès' *What is the Third Estate?* did in France, clarifying ideas and focusing attitudes at a pivotal time. Unlike Burke, Paine was a political radical who believed in republicanism and universal democracy. Consequently, he was a supporter of the French Revolution, rather than a critic of it. Outraged by Burke's arguments in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Paine responded with his own interpretation of the French Revolution. *Rights of Man* was published in two parts in 1791 and 1792. Paine argued that before 1789 France was a despotic aristocracy, wedded to inequality and privilege, addicted to war and stifled by its disregard for ordinary people. The only remedy for this, Paine argued, was a revolution from the ground up, in order to rebuild government and society.

## The 19th century

During the 19th century, the best-known British historian of the French Revolution was **Thomas Carlyle** (1795-1881). Born in Scotland and trained as a mathematics teacher, Carlyle turned his hand to philosophy and history in his late 20s. The restoration of the Bourbon monarchy in 1815 prompted Carlyle to begin writing a history of the French Revolution. It was delayed by several years when a housemaid accidentally used Carlyle's first draft to start a fire, forcing him to rewrite it from scratch. *The French Revolution: A History* was eventually published in 1837. Unlike previous histories of the revolution, which were written in dry and bland tones, Carlyle's account was colorful and dramatic, filled with poetic language, florid expression and metaphor. He was not afraid of depicting violence in graphic terms or casting judgement on revolutionary figures, sometimes in strong terms. Politically, Carlyle saw the events of 1789-91 as the true revolution. The monarchy and aristocracy were filled with incompetence and corruption, Carlyle believed, and got what they deserved. Carlyle despised the radical phase and particularly the "sea-green incorruptible" Robespierre, who presided over the Reign of Terror with ruthlessness and disregard for humanity. Carlyle's history of the

revolution proved popular with the general public and some historians. Many academics savaged its writing style, however, claiming that Carlyle had blended history with romantic literature.

One of Carlyle's contemporaries was French historian **François Mignet** (1796-1884). Born in the dissident Vendée region, Mignet was the son of a locksmith and was raised in an atmosphere of *bourgeois* liberalism. He trained as a lawyer but turned to history, beginning a study of the revolution in his mid-20s. Mignet's 1924 text *Histoire de la Révolution Française* ('History of the French Revolution') was determinist in its approach ("the revolution was impossible to avoid") and liberal in its political perspective. The *bourgeoisie* are Mignet's true revolutionary heroes: their uprising in 1789 was an inevitable and overdue response to rising inequality, corruption and France's bloated aristocracy. From the National Assembly to the National Guard and beyond, Mignet praises *bourgeois* revolutionaries and is forgiving of their faults and errors. He treads lightly when describing the radicalism of the later revolution. For Mignet, the revolution should not be judged by its radicals, its street mobs or its guillotines. Unlike Carlyle, who condemned the bloodthirstiness of the *sans culottes*, Mignet attributes the bloodshed of 1793-94 to difficult conditions rather than inherently violent people.

Another prominent historian of the 19th century was **Jules Michelet** (1798-1874). The son of a struggling Paris printer, Michelet's father saved enough to provide him with a university education. He obtained a position at the Collège Sainte-Barbe while still in his early 20s and later tutored the daughters of French royalty. Michelet did not attempt much serious historical writing until the 1830s. In the last half of his life, he produced several significant historical works including *The History of France* (1844) and *History of the French Revolution* (1847). Ideologically, Michelet was liberal, republican, anti-clerical and socially progressive. He saw the revolution as a necessary event that attempted to advance government and society, based on the sound ideas of the Enlightenment. More democratically minded than Mignet, he expressed faith in the people – even the Jacobins, who in Michelet's view were acting with good intentions to defend the republic. Michelet's radical liberalism was sometimes controversial. In 1851 his lectures at the Collège de Paris were suspended, after complaints and objections to their content. He was dismissed from the Collège soon after and forced into retirement.

## The novelists

**Charles Dickens** (1812-1870) was an English author of fiction rather than a historian. Dickens deserves mention here, however, because one of his books helped shape recent views of the revolution, particularly in Britain. Published in 1859, *A Tale of Two Cities* was a bleak, humorless historical novel. A clear departure from Dickens' other works, it contains a fictionalized account of revolutionary France, described in comparison with late 18th century London. For historical detail, Dickens relied on Thomas Carlyle's *The French Revolution: A History* (he later admitted reading this book "five hundred times" as preparation). *A Tale of Two Cities* begins with its famous opening line "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times" before going on to paint a grim picture of both the *Ancien Régime* and revolutionary France. Dickens' narrative suggests the French Revolution was an inevitable product of aristocratic privilege and exploitation – but the revolution, held captive by the troubled and seedy world of Paris, soon deteriorated into anarchy, mob rule and state-sanctioned violence.

Another novelist who influenced public perceptions of the French Revolution was Emma Orczy, later **Baroness Orczy** (1865-1947). From a family of Hungarian aristocrats who sought refuge in London, Orczy married a young Englishman in 1894. Short of money, she began writing novels and short stories around the turn of the 20th century. The most successful of these stories was *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, which appeared in 1903 as both a novel and a play. Essentially an adventure story, *The Scarlet Pimpernel* tells of an English playboy who rescues endangered aristocrats from France during the Reign of Terror. These rescues are usually achieved with clever disguises, brilliant swordsmanship and other daring feats. Orczy demonstrates a negative view of the revolution, based on her portrayals of class. Her aristocratic characters, for the most part, are decent, generous and enlightened – or in the case of the French nobles, hapless victims. The revolutionaries, by contrast, are stereotypes of the working classes: coarse, bloodthirsty and easy to fool.

## The Marxists

Marxist interpretations dominated the historiography of the French Revolution for much of the 20th century. To Marxist historians, the tumult in France began as a *bourgeois* revolution. It was driven by class struggle between the rising *bourgeoisie* and the aristocracy and marked France's transition from feudalism to capitalism. The *bourgeois* revolutionaries sought two things: access to government and political power, and

economic reforms amenable to their business interests. They advocated a liberal society where individual rights and freedoms were protected – but they were reluctant to share these rights and freedoms with the working classes. Because *bourgeois* deputies dominated the National Constituent Assembly, most of the Assembly's reforms and policies reflected the social and economic interests of the capitalist class.

The 20th century's most prominent Marxist historian was **Georges Lefebvre** (1874-1959). Lefebvre is best known for describing the French Revolution in four stages or phases, each driven by different classes and class interests:

1. The 'aristocratic revolution' of 1787-88 saw the noble class challenge the power of the monarchy and force the king to summon the Estates-General.
2. The '*bourgeois*' revolution unfolded at the Estates-General, where representatives of the affluent Third Estate demanded political representation and a national assembly.
3. The 'urban revolution' erupted on the streets of Paris in mid-1789 and was driven by the economic interests of the working classes.
4. It corresponded with the 'peasant revolution' against feudal dues and economic conditions, which manifested as the Great Fear.

Unlike previous historians, Lefebvre and his fellow Marxists looked at "history from below" (a phrase Lefebvre apparently coined). Much of his research was concerned with how ordinary people, particularly peasants, responded to revolutionary ideas and participated in revolutionary events. At the time of Lefebvre's death, he was arguably the world's foremost expert on the French Revolution.

Lefebvre's view of the revolution was echoed by other historians of the 1900s. One was a friend and former student of Lefebvre named **Albert Soboul** (1914-1982). An Algerian-born Sorbonne academic, Soboul saw the revolution as the product of class grievances and struggles. He spent much of his professional life examining lower class groups and movements, particularly the *sans culottes*, who were the subject of Soboul's doctoral thesis and several of his books. Soboul's groundbreaking research brought the *sans culottes* to the forefront of the revolution – just as Lefebvre's research had done for the peasantry. Soboul did not consider the *sans culottes* a class. In his view, they were a loose coalition of artisans, labourers and *petit bourgeoisie* who, despite their differences and internal tensions, became united against the aristocracy and wealthy commoners. Yet both the *Montagnards* and *sans culottes* were motivated by class interests. The *sans culottes* demanded price controls, action against hoarders and speculators, production quotas and a stable currency. The Girondins, who were more representative of the *bourgeoisie* and favoured free-market economic policies, opposed these measures. Like other Marxist historians, Soboul considers the Reign of Terror a desperate response to war and dire economic conditions. The arrest of Robespierre and the end of the Terror marked the return to the *bourgeoisie* to political power.

## The revisionists

Marxist interpretations prevailed in the 20th century but they did not go unchallenged. Several revisionist historians emerged and confronted the Marxist orthodoxy, further broadening the historiography of the revolution.

One of the most notable revisionists was **Alfred Cobban** (1901-1968). A Cambridge-educated Englishman, Cobban was a professor of French history at University College, London for more than 30 years. As a historian, Cobban aimed for a common-sense approach to the revolution, free of class-based motives and assumptions. He saw the events of 1789 as a political revolution with social consequences. It was not, as Marxist historians often suggested, undertaken to implement a freer form of capitalism. Late 18th century France was already a rising capitalist economy, Cobban argued; many Third Estate deputies had grown rich from capitalist enterprises long before 1789. Cobban also pointed to the lack of decisive economic policy in the new regime – and the fact that French capitalism stagnated rather than improved in the early 1790s. Cobban's argument was supported by George V. Taylor, an American historian. Taylor pointed out that many nobles were actually progressive capitalists, while many *bourgeois* revolutionaries were scarcely capitalist at all.

Within France, the best-known revisionist historian was **François Furet** (1927-1997). Born in Paris, Furet became an active communist after World War II before abandoning communism in his late 20s. In 1965 Furet, in collaboration with his brother-in-law Denis Richet, published his first significant work on the revolution, *La Révolution Française*. This book shunned Marxist interpretations, examining the revolution from a position more aligned with liberals like Alexis de Tocqueville. According to Furet, the revolution began as an expression of liberal-democratic principles but had moved off course by 1792. The term Furet used

was *déravage*, a French word meaning ‘skid’ or ‘slide’. Because the revolution had no decisive or unifying leadership, it became a series of unexpected events, responses and reactions, class tensions and factional conflict. As this tension and conflict worsened in 1792-93 the revolution disintegrated into terror and anarchy. While Marxist historians claimed the Reign of Terror was a valid response to internal and external opposition, Furet argued that terror was ‘built-in’ to revolutionary action from its early days. The power of the Jacobins and *sans culottes* in 1793-94, Furet argued, was intrinsically connected to mob violence.

### **The narrative revival**

The bicentenary of the French Revolution in 1989 inspired a new wave of narrative histories, further expanding the historiography of the French Revolution.

One of the more successful narrative accounts was *Citizens* by British historian **Simon Schama**. A general release book rather than a piece of academic research, *Citizens* marked a return to the center stage of narrative history, filled with color, drama and suspense but light on theory and intensive analysis. Schama’s approach to writing history, along with his interpretations of the revolution, was not to everybody’s taste. Politically, Schama is a liberal whose perspectives of the revolution align with those of Edmund Burke and Alexis de Tocqueville. He claims the French Revolution began as a “whispering campaign” based on false premises. The objectives of 1789 were honorable enough – but the revolution was too disorganized, leaderless and reliant on violence to bring about political change.

*Citizens* is more sympathetic to Louis XVI, the aristocracy and political conservatives than other histories. Conversely, it despises radical figures like Jean-Paul Marat and Robespierre, who were totalitarian in their outlook but myopic and out of their depth. Narrative accounts of the revolution have also been produced by historians such as Christopher Hibbert and Sylvia Neely.

### **Feminist historiography**

The last 40 years have also seen feminist contributions to the historiography of the French Revolution. Several female historians have produced interesting perspectives about how the revolution involved, marginalized and affected women. The general consensus is that the revolution did little for French women and in some respects pushed them backwards.

The American scholar **Joan B. Landes**, for example, has argued that aristocratic women wielded a degree of political influence – but that the instruments of government and revolutionary organization, which were controlled by men, suppressed this. The ideas of the revolution, Landes contends, were both economically *bourgeois* and socially conservative. Instead of relaxing the constraints on French women, the revolution actually preserved and reinforced gender differences and barriers.

Historians like **Olwen Hufton** and **Dominique Godineau** have also examined the role of working-class women, particularly female *sans culottes* and peasants. These women were politically active between 1789 and 1792 but their activism was eventually taken over and smothered by the radicalism of the Jacobins in 1793.

The French academic **Catherine Marand-Fouquet** argues that the demands of revolutionary women have been trivialised and reduced to complaints about prices, food and hunger. **Marilyn Yalom** suggests that the French Revolution not only excluded women, it made them more dependent on men – and thus more economically fragile and prone to suffering.

**Annette Rosa** offers a dissenting point of view, suggesting that during the revolution French women acted as *de facto* citizens. She believes that the erosion of church power and reforms to civil law liberated women to a degree, making marriage less binding and restrictive than it had been.

### **SOURCE**

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# THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

*There are very few events that were as significant to our society as the French Revolution. It's commonly described as the emerging bourgeoisie's (middle class) victory over the landed nobility and a breakthrough for a more equal society. Others would say that the revolution represented anarchy and violence, and the debate "for" and "against" the revolution has been going on since 1789. We will in this exercise mention some of the interpretations of the causes, events and results of the revolution.*

## **WHAT WERE THE REASONS OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION?**

Historians often describe the reasons as a combination of long and short term factors. They can, however, individually emphasize the importance of specific factors. Focusing on long and short term factors is a very common way of describing historical events and this method could easily be used to describe, for example, the causes of the First World War or the Russian Revolution (the fall of the Russian Czar) 1917.

## **BACKGROUND**

In 1789 the French King Louis XVI decided to gather the "*Estates-General*", the country's parliament. They had not been called in for 175 years (i.e. since 1614). The reason why the king took this drastic step was economic, the treasury was empty. One of the main reasons of the financial crisis was that the nobility and the Church, who owned about a third of the countries land, did not pay taxes. France had also helped the American colonies in their war of liberation against the English which resulted in even more debts and financial problems.

When the king decided to summon the Estates-General the bourgeoisie (the middle class) and the peasants saw this as an opportunity to end the privileges of the nobility and the Church. One of the main problems was that the three estates, nobility, Church and the "*Third Estate*" only had one vote each as a group. This meant that the nobility together with the Church always could block any suggestion from the Third Estate. The Third Estate included all the people that did not belong to the nobility – the Second Estate or were part of the Church – the First Estate (which meant around 97 percent of the total population). The great bulk of these were poor farmers and laborers. The Third Estate representatives were rich burghers (i.e. merchants, bankers or lawyers) many of whom had become wealthy during the last century's booming foreign trade. The Estates-General composition did not reflect the economic and social realities in France of 1789. The bourgeoisie who were well-read and had listened to the ideas of enlightened philosophers like Voltaire and Rousseau did not accept that a small wealthy elite controlled the Estates-General, and that this elite got to keep their privileges (like tax exemptions and the exclusive right to higher positions within the state administration). These exclusive rights within the royal court, the church and the army were very offensive to the emerging bourgeoisie.

The 1780's was also a time of great financial difficulties for the business in France. The French textile industry suffered from the competition from Britain, which created French unemployment. When the country was hit by famine the situation became worse. As a result tens of thousands of

hungry and unemployed men in Paris put pressure on the ruling elite in the city and huge groups of hungry farm workers threatened the landed nobility in rural areas. Different crop failures during the middle of the 1780s caused the bread prices to rise. Some workers now had to use more than 75 percent of their pay to buy their daily bread.

The new parliament could as mentioned not agree on the voting rules. At June 20 members of the Third Estate gathered at an in-door tennis court in Versailles. They had three days earlier declared that they now were the new National Assembly of France. They took an oath to not leave until France received a new constitution (it became known as the "*Tennis Court Oath*"). This was a revolutionary act. The King did not agree with the formation of the new National Assembly and therefore started to gather his troops around Paris. This move caused great excitement among Parisians and they began to arm themselves. The royal officers in the city started to lose control of the situation. At the evening of July 14 1789 a crowd of people pushed towards the ancient fortress of the Bastille in search of weapons. The excited crowd stormed the fortress and the French Revolution had thus started.

The unrest soon spread from the cities to the countryside. Farmers plagued by years of fiscal pressure and hunger took up arms and stormed nobility goods. They burned the archives where their taxes and duties were recorded. In August the People's Assembly abolished the aristocratic privileges and tithe to the church. During the same month the National Assembly adopted the "*Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*". In the first paragraph it read: "*Men are born, and always continue, free and equal in respect of their rights...*"

## ***HISTORIANS STRESSES DIFFERENT FACTORS***

This is in brief the long- and short-term factors behind the revolution. Different factors are emphasized by historians. Some argue that the revolution was inevitable and if it had not occurred in 1789 it would have broken out one of the following years. Some historians emphasize the more short-term factors and claim that it was a series of unfortunate circumstances that made the revolution break out. Other historians see the French Revolution as part of a social transformation that was going on in many countries at the time.

The American colonies' independence from the England is another example of a similar development. In the American Declaration of Independence in 1776 Thomas Jefferson wrote "*all men are created equal*". In the French Declaration of Human Rights of August 1789, it says "*men are born and remain free in respect of their rights...*" Ideas that we today see as natural were at this time very revolutionary.

## ***WHO WAS IT REALLY THAT MADE THE REVOLUTION?***

Perhaps the most famous historian of the French Revolution, Sorbonne professor Georges Lefebvre, agrees to the idea of a bourgeoisie (middle class) revolution. But he also claims that it was actually four revolutions that took place at four different times.

The first revolution occurred much before 1789, when the old aristocracy revolted against the autocratic monarchy that tried in vain to solve the financial crisis. Lefebvre writes that in 1789 "*The American colonies' revolt may actually be considered the most important immediate cause of the French Revolution...*" The support to the American colonies combined with the fact that the nobility

and the Church were exempt from many taxes created the crisis. During the 1700s the nobility succeeded in advancing their positions against the monarchy and they stubbornly refused to give up their privileges, despite the financial crisis. They claimed that it was only the Estates-General that had the right to change the tax rules. Therefore they forced the king to finally summon the Estates-General. This action, however, became a huge disappointment for the nobility.

The aristocratic revolt against the monarchy was followed by the Third Estates revolt against the two other estates when they formed a National Assembly. They thereby launched the bourgeois revolution that aimed to abolish all the privileges of the upper classes and fulfill the Enlightenment ideals. The bourgeois revolution was threatened, however, by the reluctant nobility and the king who summoned his troops. This triggered a third revolution among the laborers in Paris who stormed the Bastille. The riots quickly spread across the country when the starving and unemployed workers stormed different institutions.

This triggered a fourth revolution where we see frustrated farmers and farm workers storm the nobility goods to crush the remnants of the old feudal society. Lefebvre's conclusion is that the result of the revolution indeed was a victory for the bourgeoisie, but he believes that it was the role of the peasantry in the revolution that was the deciding factor. He writes:

*"... today you can say without any exaggeration that the revolution would hardly have succeeded without their participation [...] the National Assembly where the farmers were not represented devoted little interest to their problems. But suddenly this forgotten social group took their cause into their own hands and it was this action that was the death blow to the last remnants of the feudal regime. The peasants' revolt must be considered as one of the most remarkable features of the French Revolution. "*

It is striking to see how various historians put emphasis on different groups of importance in their submissions. In Lefebvre's eyes is the French Revolution actually four revolutions, and it is the farmers who provide the most important contribution to the bourgeois revolution.

## ***WAS THE FRENCH REVOLUTION A GOOD REVOLUTION?***

The French Revolution unleashed different views based on strong feelings for or against it all over Europe. A contemporary, Edmund Burke (who later would be described as the father of conservatism), formulated his ideology on the basis of a strong disapproval of the revolution. In 1790 he published his major work "*Reflections of the French Revolution*" where he attacks the mob of the revolution. The revolutionary anarchy was fundamentally destructive for the French society according to Burke. One of his basic ideas is that societies are built up by several generations and that any change of the societies should be slow and gradual. He strongly disapproved the drastic change that the revolution created and said the following to explain how a society should change, "*Constitutions emerge, they are not made*"

Marxist historians, traditionally very influential even in Western Europe, have described the revolution as a bourgeois revolution. Marxism analyzes the society on the basis of how production is organized and that the groups who own the means of production, for example, a citizen who owns a factory, getting rich through the appropriation of the surplus that the workers produce. For a Marxist the revolution meant that a new ruling class came to power, i.e., the nobility was replaced by the bourgeoisie. This was in itself not positive since the great mass of people continues to be exploited by a ruling class.



But many historians want to see the revolution as a good development, as a breakthrough for the ideas which largely characterizes our democratic society today. The French Revolution and the preceding Enlightenment marked a breakthrough for reason and independent critical thinking. Ideas of human equality, one of the absolute foundation bolts in the revolution, are as relevant today as it was in the 1789.

