

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION 1789-1799

Unable to collect more taxes or borrow money Louis XVI had to call the **Estates-General** in. This old semi-feudal body had not been called in since 1614 - now it was 1788! The nobility was very much behind this development since they thought they would be able to better their positions in the French autocracy. The first meeting was going to take place in May 1789.

In 1614 the Estates-General consisted of three "orders" - one for each Estate. Each order had the same number of representatives and they voted as one body. That meant that the clergy (**First Estate**) had one vote, the nobility (**Second Estate**) had one vote and the rest (**Third Estate**) had one vote. Several more liberal reformers protested against this traditional order. Their **first demand** was to have as many representatives as the other two Estates together. The king yielded to their will. The **second demand** was that each representative's vote should be counted instead of a "*body vote*" remained unsolved.

When they were supposed to meet the Third Estate refused unless they second demand - to meet as one big body with an individual vote for each representative was accepted. After weeks of arguing the Third Estate (plus a few members of the clergy) invited the others to create a **National Assembly**. On June 20th 1789 they met (on an indoor tennis court) and they vowed to not disband until a new constitution had been written for France. This event is called the "**Tennis Court Oath**". After some resistance the king gave in and ordered the two other Estates to join the Third Estate in the **National Assembly**. The old Estates-General had ceased to exist! Meanwhile the king also ordered royal mercenary troops to surround Versailles and Paris...

NATIONAL ASSEMBLY 1789-1791: Due to the famine and the economic depression the king and his action became the target of the people. Crowds in Paris started to go out and look for weapons. A misunderstanding led them to storm an old fort, **the Bastille**, in this search for weapons at **July 14th 1789**. The mob stormed the place and killed the small garrison but did not find any weapons (they had been misinformed). Ever since this day the 14th of July has been **the French National Day**). The king ordered his royal troops to leave.

In many rural areas the peasants revolted. They refused to pay any taxes, attacked castles and manor houses of the nobility, destroyed records of feudal dues and in some cases burned the manors to the ground. The French Revolution had started.

The National Assembly made several reforms. They declared that **feudalism was abolished and all manorial dues ended**. They also issued a "**Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen**" (August 27th 1789) which said that the government should be based on the fundamental principles of liberty, equality, and natural rights. To be able to pay of some debts the National Assembly seized Church land. Louis XVI tried to escape June 1791 with his family but was caught (at Varennes - a Swedish aristocrat, Axel von Fersen "*the younger*", helped in the planning and execution of this escape attempt). This escape attempt raised the question about monarchy and what to do with the French Royal family.

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY 1791-1792: The new French constitution was presented in September 1791. France now became a constitutional monarchy. Laws were to be made by a Legislative Assembly. The king could delay legislation, but he could not veto it absolutely. This was a constitution that was designed for the new influential group - the bourgeoisie. One evidence for this is that all privileges had been taken away, but you still had to own property to be able to vote. Only 50 000 people of the total population (24-26 million people depending on which source you use) qualified.

Several noble emigrants (*émigrés*) put pressure on the Royal houses of Europe to restore order in France. Emperor Leopold II of Austria (Habsburg) was the French Queens, Marie Antoinette's, brother. He and the Prussian King issued the "**Declaration of Pillnitz**" in August 1791 where they declared that it was the duty of **all monarchs** to restore order in France! This was not a declaration of war - rather the opposite since both countries (Austria/Habsburg Empire and Prussia) knew England and Russia were not interested in war against France and without them these two countries could not start.

The problem was instead the revolutionaries in France. They believed France would soon be attacked and they would lose what they gained. They formed a party that declared that starting a surprise war was

the only way to solve the problem. The influence of this war party was so strong that the new Legislative Assembly declared **war against Austria** (Habsburg Empire) April 20th 1792.

The Royal family was imprisoned in August. In September over 1000 royalists were executed (the "**September Massacre**"). The Legislative Assembly was abolished, and a new National Constitutional Convention was elected. This election was based on **universal suffrage** - the bourgeois revolution had now become more radical...

NATIONAL CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION 1792-1795: At the very first meeting it **proclaimed France a Republic** and defied all royalty. It declared it was going to spread the ideas of the revolution "**liberty, equality and fraternity**" all over Europe. Soon French armies attacked the Austrian Netherlands (Belgium) and areas south of the Rhine. **By 1793 France was in war with almost all of Europe;** England, Prussia, Austria (Habsburg Empire), the Netherlands, Spain, Portugal, Sweden, and Sardinia. These countries are usually referred to as the "**First Coalition**" against France.

The pressure of the war (French armies suffered several defeats), lack of food and high bread prices, rebellions within the country (émigrés aided by more conservative peasants, especially in the west), and open struggle in the National Constitutional Convention (between the more moderate members - the **Girondins** against the radicals - the **Jacobins**) led to the Jacobin party defeating the Girondins. The Girondists now also became "*Enemies of the State*"...

In December 1792 Louis XVI was tried for treason. In January 1793 he was sent to the guillotine. He was soon followed by many more. In **April 1793** executive authority was given to a group of twelve members who were elected by the National Constitutional Convention. This group was called the **Committee of Public Safety** and the leader of the group was **Maximilien de Robespierre**. It was he and his group that launched the "**Reign of Terror**". Between August 1793 and July 1794 more than 40000 persons died. One of the first ones sent to the guillotine was the Queen – Marie Antoinette. Most of the people killed during this period were not part of the old aristocracy or clergy – it was ordinary citizens.

The Committee of Public Safety tried to solve the economic problems with a **strict program of price controls**. The war against the First Coalition had to be won so the Committee of Public Safety launched a program of **national mobilization** - the "**levée en masse**". By spring 1794 France had over 800 000 soldiers - the largest army in Europe and they did not fight for a king but for the **survival of the new Republic!** They fought for a cause. The new army started to win several important victories against a weak and divided coalition. Already at summer 1794 the nation was saved (but it took to 1797 until the war was officially over). Since there was no real danger more people wanted to get rid of the harsh dictatorship of the Committee of Public Safety. In July 1794 Robespierre and his followers were sent to meet the same destiny as the king and queen - they were "*shaved by the national barber*". With this the "**Reign of Terror**" ended.

DIRECTORY 1795-1799: In October 1795 France got a new constitution (again). A two-house legislature was established. They elected a body of five men called **Directors**. Once again voting restrictions based on property was introduced. The bourgeoisie was back. The royalists were frustrated and so were the workers who had experienced a short period when they were given the right to vote. The war, even if it was basically won, did still cause tension and the economy was not getting better - the inflation continued.

At the free elections of 1797 several royalists were elected which now threaten the latest constitution. The Directory then called upon a young General for help. His name was **Napoleon Bonaparte**. With the support of his army he restored order in Paris and helped the Directory declare the elections null and void. The Directory thereby violated its own constitution... In **1797 France signed a peace treaty with Austria** (Habsburg Empire) in **Campo Formia**. This treaty gave France the Austrian Netherlands, considerable territory on the Rhine and some regions in northern Italy. This did not calm the French people who faced more economic problems and a corrupt inefficient Directory. In **1798 a Second Coalition** was formed (Britain and Russia) against France. This gave an opportunity for a successful young General - Napoleon Bonaparte...

RESULTS - French Revolution (1799)

- **Three ideals: Liberty / Equality / Fraternity! These were partially fulfilled in 1799**
- **Class privileges were abolished**
- **All titles of nobility were abolished**
- **The Church was nationalized (religion came was for a while abolished altogether)**
- **The Army was dissolved and replaced by the National Guard (conscription)**
- **A new constitution was written (and adopted)**
- **Abolished Absolutism - France became a Republic**
- **Universal suffrage was introduced for men**
- **Equality before the law**
- **Advancement opportunities for the lower classes of society**
- **France's internal tariffs were abolished**
- **A new calendar was introduced ("Gregorian Calendar")**
- **A uniform weights and measures system was introduced (meters and kilograms)**
- **A new coinage was introduced (from the 1796 "Silver francs")**
- **A clear transition from the French feudal society to a more modern capitalist society**

MIDDLE CLASS – The bourgeoisie: In general, this group was the big winner of the French Revolution. They now had political influence. The wealthy burghers who engaged in trade benefitted especially since France abolished all internal tariffs, the former guild system and introduced the uniform weight and measure system. The new tax system also came to favor this group.

Napoleon changed some of the results above...

The French Revolution's Influence on Women's Rights

Kelsey Flower

When looking back on the French Revolution, many think of the natural human rights men gained with the adoption of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* in August of 1798. However, most people disregard the progress in women's rights that also occurred during the revolution. As Shirley Elson Roessler, author of the book *Out of the Shadows*, says, "*The topic of women's participation in the French Revolution has generally received little attention from historians, who have displayed a tendency to minimize the role of women in the major events of those years, or else to ignore it all together.*"¹ While it is true that women did not gain explicit rights during this time, the women of the French Revolution and the activities they participated in did influence feminism and women's rights from that point forward. The French women's March on Versailles, their political clubs and pamphlets, and their prominent women political figures all contributed to changing the way women were viewed in society. Although these views and rights were taken away again during Napoleon's rule, they set the precedent for women's rights in the future.

During the Ancien Régime, the political and social system in France before the revolution occurred,² both single and married women had few rights. Until they were married, women were controlled by their fathers and after marriage this control shifted to the husband. Women had no power over their property or even over their own person. Economically, their situation was also unfavorable. They were not paid well, and the law "*confined women to domestic service, heavy labor, and ill-paid labor-intensive industries like the lace trade.*"³ They did have a few small political rights; for example, women in religious orders and noble women were allowed to send representatives to the Estates General.⁴ However, these rights were insignificant compared to those of men. For the most part, people thought women should stay at home and raise children, and that sexual equality was a bad idea. These ideas were age old "*truths*" of Western Civilization and they were also more recently influenced by the French Enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who strongly believed that women should not engage in politics.

During the late 1780s, women felt as if they were losing the few traditional rights they originally possessed and that their "*roles were gradually being eroded by state intervention.*"⁵ Brochures started to appear in 1787 arguing for higher education, access to higher paying jobs, and equality in marriage for women.⁶ All of these ideas about economic and sexual equality that were first brought up during the French Revolution have continued to recur in society through present day. But unlike today, only a few men during the 18th century agreed that gender equality should become reality. One of them, the Marquis de Condorcet, thought women should be able to vote. Even though many disagreed with Condorcet and his feminist friends, it was a big breakthrough that there were both men and women who agreed women should have equal rights, a view that is commonplace today.

The March on Versailles on October 5, 1789, was the first major event that helped set the tone for women in politics. Because of a series of bad harvests, and the country's debt from their support of the American Revolution and bankrolling Marie Antoinette's expensive tastes, bread prices were skyrocketing in the summer and fall of 1789. Wages were so low that poor, working class women were having trouble feeding their families. Some began to participate in riots, such as the Reveillon Riot in Paris against low wages, and even the Bastille Riot on July 13, 1789. By October, Paris was starving, and despite many riots, there was still no food. In the March on Versailles, women put bread on pikes and marched from Paris to Versailles. Men followed the women, and, together, they captured the king and brought him and his family back to Paris to see the living conditions. This was a turning point in the Revolution for women because it showed that they could help the cause, and thus were not politically irrelevant as previously thought. Also, even though the men that marched served as escorts or came separately from the women, the march still showed that men and women were able to work side-by-side as equals to accomplish a goal, in this case humiliating the out-of-touch monarchs.

Starting in the 1790s, women were again seen in a new way politically. After a representative government started in France, women "*changed their tactic*"⁷ from writing political pamphlets to participating in political clubs. Political clubs—emerging in the last quarter of the eighteenth century—had originally been all men, but women began to come as spectators to clubs such as the Jacobins and Cordeliers in Paris. Their experience of political awakening led to over thirty women's clubs being created in French cities such as Dijon, Lyon, and Bordeaux, in addition to Paris.⁸ The multiple locations of these clubs prove how the idea of women's rights was already beginning to spread its influence nationwide. Both men and women representatives from the clubs began to petition the National Assembly about higher education for women and marital laws, as well as ideas for the revolution. One woman, Theroigne de Mericourt, founded *Amis de a Loi*, a short-lived co-ed society meant to "*enlighten the populace in political matters and to dispel fear and ignorance.*"⁹ Despite being a woman, she decided to propose the idea for a new building for the National Assembly. Although her proposal was denied, "*the action [was] noteworthy that a woman made such an address at that time.*"¹⁰ This concept of

women taking noteworthy political actions proves that political clubs were helping women to overcome boundaries and possess more confidence in addressing men. They were trying to contribute to the revolution and to their own well-being, a big step up from sitting at home with the children as they were so relegated in the Ancien Régime and before.

Beyond starting their own clubs, women were able to assert their sexual equality by founding and participating in dual-gender clubs. A mixed club was created in Paris in 1790, and in 1791 it became known as the *Societe Fraternelle de Patriotes de Deux Sexes*. Women and men participated equally in discussion and elections. For example, there were both male and female secretaries and four men and women helped select new members and introduce them into the society. The club increased rapidly in popularity and members and led to many similar clubs in Paris such as the *Societe Fraternelle de Halles*, the *Societe Fraternelle de Minimes*, and *Nomophiles*. In these types of clubs that welcomed women, “the basis was established for the process of [women’s] politicization.”¹¹ One example of this is the club, *Societe de Indigents*. Created by Louis- Marie Prudhomme, a one-time anti-feminist editor and journalist of the newspaper *Revolutions de Paris*, the club not only accepted women, but was run by Prudhomme’s very own wife. This transformation of a male revolutionary from an advocate of sexism into a proponent of his wife’s political equality clearly depicts the evolution of women’s status in the French Revolution.

Although political clubs now played a large role for women’s politics, pamphlets and brochures for women’s rights were still being published in the background. One pamphleteer, Olympe de Gouges, wrote a declaration of women’s equality that rings true even to this day. De Gouges, the daughter of a butcher, was born in 1743 and was self-educated. By the beginning of the revolution she had already written many pamphlets. Despite the success of her previous work, it wasn’t until September 1791 that she wrote her most famous document in response to the discriminatory essence of the new French Constitution.

In August of 1789, the National Assembly had adopted the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen*, a document spelling out human liberties that was eventually used in France’s Constitution in 1791. Ironically, although the *Declaration* supposedly spelled out human rights, they only applied to free, non-enslaved men. For example, Article First of the *Declaration* states, “Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may be based only on considerations of the common good.”¹² This article helps to demonstrate that the basic human rights applied for the first time during the French Revolution were not basic human rights at all—they were solely for men. The Preamble of the *Declaration* also states that the documents purpose is to set forth “the natural, unalienable and sacred rights of man,”¹³ further highlighting the complete ignorance of women and the strong roles they had played thus far in the Revolution.

De Gouges based her September 1791 pamphlet on the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen*, speaking of the “natural, inalienable, and sacred rights of women”¹⁴ that mirrored those of men. She bravely went further, suggesting that “property belongs to both sexes whether united or separated,”¹⁵ suggesting that she strongly believed that women should be able live life independent of a husband if they chose. De Gouges even encouraged women to “wake up” and “recognize [their] rights”¹⁶ in her writing, awakening a new view that women truly deserved to be given equal rights to men. Rights were something that they, as humans, were entitled to. Although Olympe de Gouges was later executed during the Reign of Terror for her writing, her work was forever preserved as proof of the changing view of women’s rights during the French Revolution. Many inconceivable ideas, such as the freedom of opinion and thought, were suddenly encouraged to the point where women felt like they were entitled to these rights. This entitlement to freedom has influenced women through modern day.

Unfortunately for 19th century women, when Napoleon took over France in 1799, most of the progress they had made in terms of gaining rights and being recognized as politically equal would be reversed. Napoleon has even been quoted as saying “the husband must possess the absolute power and right to say to his wife: Madame, you shall not go out, you shall not go to the theater, you shall not visit such and such a person: for the children you bear, they shall be mine.”¹⁷ However, if the short-term effect on women’s rights had failed, the long-term effect was certainly the opposite. Many of the rights women in North America, Europe, and other parts of the world enjoy today match up perfectly with the rights Olympe de Gouges espoused in her pamphlet—including equality with men, freedom of speech and opinion, and the right to own property. Women in America in the 1920s fought for the right to vote, a right first brought up by the Marquis de Condorcet during the Revolution. And finally, the sense of entitlement that women today feel about the rights we have and the fact that they should be equal to men dates back to the pamphlets spread during the French Revolution. With all the modern day evidence of women’s rights that were first articulated, if not put to action, during the French Revolution, it is clear the Revolution played a major role in influencing women’s rights for centuries to come.

Notes

1. Shirley Elson Roessler, *Out of the Shadows: Women and Politics in the French Revolution, 1789-95* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2009), 1.
2. Encyclopaedia Britannica Online, s.v. "*Ancien Régime*," accessed November 21, 2011.
3. Jane Abray, "Feminism in the French Revolution," History Reference Center, accessed November 21, 2011, Ebsco.
4. Ibid.
5. Roessler, 7.
6. Abray.
7. Ibid.
8. Roessler, 50.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid., 51.
11. Ibid., 52.
12. Encyclopaedia Britannica Online, s.v. "*Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*," accessed November 19, 2011.
13. Ibid.
14. Olympe de Gouges, "*Declaration of the Rights of Woman*," in *Western Civilization* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2008), 112-113.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Steven Kreis, "*Europe and the Superior Being: Napoleon*," The History Guide, last modified February 28, 2006, <http://www.historyguide.org/intellect/lecture15a.html>.

Bibliography

- Abray, Jane. "Feminism in the French Revolution." History Reference Center. Accessed November 21, 2011. Ebsco.
- De Gouges, Olympe. "Declaration of the Rights of Woman." *Western Civilization*, 112-113. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2008.
- "French Revolution." History Reference Center. Accessed November 21, 2011. Last modified 2011. Ebsco.
- Graham, Ruth. "Loaves and Liberty: Women in the French Revolution." *Western Civilization*, 123. 7th ed. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2008.
- Mason, Amelia Ruth Gere. *The Women of the French Salons*. Lexington: Hardpress.net, 2009.
- Roessler, Shirley Elson. *Out of the Shadows: Women and Politics in the French Revolution, 1789-95*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2009.
- Kreis, Steven. "Europe and the Superior Being: Napoleon." The History Guide. Last modified February 28, 2006. <http://www.historyguide.org/intellect/lecture15a.html>