

## SEM-IV

### MAJOR

CC 10 Paper Title- History of Europe

### UNIT-1

#### FRENCH REVOLUTION

The French involvement in the American Revolution of 1776 was a costly affair that left the country in a state of near bankruptcy. King Louis's extravagant spending also did not help matters.

Empty royal coffers, poor harvests and a rise in food prices had created feelings of unrest among the poor rural and urban populace. The matter was further worsened by the imposition of taxes that provided no relief. As a result rioting, looting and general strikes became the norm

Towards the end of 1786, a universal land tax was proposed by the controller general, Charles Alexandre de Calonne. This tax reform would no longer exempt the privileged classes like the clergy and the nobility as had been the case for centuries

The King summoned the Estates-General to pass these measures. The Estates-General was an assembly that represented the French nobility clergy and the middle class. The last time the Estates-General was called was in 1614.

The date of the meeting was fixed on May 5 1789, where grievances of the three estates would be presented to the king.

To know the Difference Between Democracy and Monarchy visit the linked article.

#### **Causes of French Revolution of 1789**

1. **Social** – The social conditions in France in the late 18th century were extremely unequal and exploitative. The clergy and the nobility formed the first two Estates and were the most privileged classes in French society. They were exempt from payment of taxes to the State. On the other hand, the Third Estate which consisted of peasants and workers formed the majority of the population. They were burdened with excessive taxes with no political and social rights. As a result, they were extremely discontent.

2. **Economic** – As a result of numerous wars waged by Louis XVI the State coffers were empty. The situation was made even more complex by France's involvement in the American War of Independence and the faulty system of taxation. While the privileged classes were excused from paying taxes the Third Estate was more and more burdened with them.
3. **Political** – The Bourbon king of France, Louis XVI was an extremely autocratic and weak-willed king who led a life of obscene luxury. This led to a lot of disenchantment among the masses who then were leading life of extreme poverty and widespread hunger.
4. **Intellectual** – The 18th century was marked by a conscious refusal by French thinkers of the 'Divine Rights Theory'. Philosophers like Rousseau rejected the paradigm of absolute monarchy and promulgated the doctrine of equality of man and sovereignty of people. They played a pivotal role in exposing the fault lines of the old political system, i.e. the ancien regime, and articulating the popular discontent.

## **Stages of French Revolution**

### **Stage I – The meeting of the Estates-General**

Despite the non-aristocratic members outnumbering the aristocrats in terms of population. Yet, they could be outvoted by the other two bodies.

Before the meeting of the Estates-General on May 5, members of the Third Estate (as the non-aristocratic class was known) began to mobilise the support of equal voting rights which would be based on head and not by status.

While the middle class believed that fiscal and judicial reform was the need of the hour, the nobles were against the idea of giving up the privileges they had enjoyed under the traditional system.

When the meeting was convened, the question over the voting process turned to open hostility between the three orders, thus the original purpose of the meeting and the authority of the king who called for it being neglected.

With further talks having failed the Third Estate met alone and formally adopted the title of National Assembly on June 17, 1789. They gathered in a nearby indoor tennis court and took the oath of office. This oath was known as the Tennis Court Oath. The members of this new assembly vowed not to disperse until reforms had been initiated.

Seeing no other option Louis XVI had to absorb the three assemblies into the new order.

You can find out the [difference between constitution and law](#) by visiting the linked article

## **Stage II – The French Revolution Begins**

The National Assembly continued to meet at Versailles. In the meantime, fear and violence had consumed Paris.

Speculations went around regarding an imminent military coup. This led to an insurgency which resulted in the taking of Bastille fortress on July 14, 1789. This event marked the beginning of the French Revolution

A wave of revolutionary fervour spread throughout the countryside, which led to a peasant revolt that saw many homes of tax collectors and burnt as well as those of the aristocrats themselves.

The rebellions caused the nobles of the country to flee en masse. This period is known as the Great Fear when the National Assembly finally dealt a fatal blow to feudalism on August 4, 1789. The old order had finally ended.

## **Stage III – Declaration of Rights of Man**

The National Assembly adopted the Rights of Man and of the Citizen on August 4, 1789. The charter was grounded on democratic principles, drawing from the philosophical as well as political ideas of Enlightenment thinkers like Jena-Jacques Rousseau. The declaration was published on August 26, 1789

The Constitution was adopted on September 3, 1791. It symbolised a new French society where the king would have limited powers with a moderate assembly wielding the most power. This, however, was not enough for the radical elements of the assembly like Goerges Danton and Maximilien de Robespierre, who demanded a trial of the king and a more republican form of government.

The French constitution was adopted on September 3, 1791. Although it was moderate in its stance by limiting the powers of the king, it was not enough for the more radical members of the assembly like Maximilien de Robespierre who wanted Loise XVI to stand trial.

To know the [difference between written and unwritten constitutions](#), visit the linked article

## **Stage IV – Reign of Terror**

The revolution took a more radical turn when a group of insurgents attacked the royal residence in Paris and arrested Louis XVI on August 10, 1792

The following month many who were accused of being the ‘enemies of the revolution’ were massacred in Paris. Some of these included the moderate voices of the revolution. The Legislative Assembly was replaced by the National Convention which proclaimed the establishment of the Republic of France and the abolition of the Monarchy.

King Louis XVI was condemned to death on January 21, 1793, and executed for treason. His wife, Marie Antoinette would follow him nine months later.

The execution of the king marked the beginning of the most violent and turbulent phase of the French Revolution – the Reign of Terror.

The National Convention was under the control of an extremist faction led by Robespierre. Under his auspices, thousands were executed for suspected treason and counter-revolutionary activities. The Reign of Terror ended with Robespierre’s execution on July 28, 1794.

Robespierre’s death began a moderate phase during which the people of France revolted against the excesses committed during the Reign of Terror. This was known as the Thermidorian Reaction.

### **Stage V – End of the French Revolution**

On August 22, 1795, the National Convention, now composed of moderates who had survived the excesses of the Reign of Terror approved the creation of a new constitution that created France’s bicameral legislature.

The power would be in the hands of the Directory, a five-member group appointed by the parliament. Any opposition to this group was removed through the efforts of the army, now led by an upcoming and successful general, Napoleon Bonaparte.

The Directory’s rule was marked by financial crises and corruption. In addition, they had ceded much of their authority to the army that had helped them stay in power.

Finally, resentment against the Directory reached a fever pitch and a coup d’état was staged by Napoleon himself, toppling them from power. Napoleon appointed himself “first consul”. The French Revolution was over and the Napoleonic era was about to begin during which time French domination of continental Europe would become the norm.

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## **Significance of the French Revolution**

For all its faults, the French Revolution is highly regarded as the turning point in modern history as the rise of new ideas steeped in liberalism, enlightenment and democracy. These ideals were carried throughout Europe by French armies that fought many wars to preserve the Republic's existence. It inspired the common folk in Europe to rise against their own Monarchs in a wave of revolutionary fervour. Although most were harshly put down, the revolutions would continue into the early years of the 19th century which saw the fall of many absolute Monarchy all over Europe.

Above all, the French Revolution brought an end to feudalism and made a path for future advances in broadly defined individual freedoms.

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