**French Revolution: 1787–1799**

**French Revolution**, also called **Revolution of 1789**, [revolutionary](https://www.britannica.com/topic/revolution-politics) movement that shook [France](https://www.britannica.com/place/France) between 1787 and 1799 and reached its first climax there in 1789—hence the conventional term “Revolution of 1789,” denoting the end of the [ancien régime](https://www.britannica.com/event/ancien-regime) in France and serving also to distinguish that event from the later French revolutions of [1830](https://www.britannica.com/event/July-Revolution) and [1848](https://www.britannica.com/event/Revolutions-of-1848)

**Origins of the Revolution**

The French Revolution had general causes common to all the revolutions of the West at the end of the 18th century and particular causes that explain why it was by far the most violent and the most universally significant of these revolutions. The first of the general causes was the social structure of the West. The [feudal](https://www.britannica.com/topic/feudalism) regime had been weakened step-by-step and had already disappeared in parts of [Europe](https://www.britannica.com/place/Europe). The increasingly numerous and prosperous elite of wealthy commoners—merchants, manufacturers, and professionals, often called the [bourgeoisie](https://www.britannica.com/topic/bourgeoisie)—aspired to political power in those countries where it did not already possess it. The [peasants](https://www.britannica.com/topic/peasantry), many of whom owned land, had attained an improved [standard of living](https://www.britannica.com/topic/standard-of-living) and [education](https://www.britannica.com/topic/education) and wanted to get rid of the last vestiges of [feudalism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/feudalism) so as to acquire the full rights of landowners and to be free to increase their holdings. Furthermore, from about 1730, higher [standards of living](https://www.britannica.com/topic/standard-of-living) had reduced the [mortality](https://www.britannica.com/science/mortality-demography) rate among adults considerably. This, together with other factors, had led to an increase in the population of Europe unprecedented for several centuries: it doubled between 1715 and 1800. For France, which with 26 million inhabitants in 1789 was the most populated country of Europe, the problem was most [acute](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/acute).

A larger population created a greater demand for food and consumer goods. The discovery of new gold mines in [Brazil](https://www.britannica.com/place/Brazil) had led to a general rise in prices throughout the West from about 1730, indicating a prosperous economic situation. From about 1770, this trend slackened, and economic crises, provoking alarm and even revolt, became frequent. Arguments for social reform began to be advanced. The [philosophes](https://www.britannica.com/topic/philosophe)—intellectuals whose writings inspired these arguments—were certainly influenced by 17th-century theorists such as [René Descartes](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Rene-Descartes), [Benedict de Spinoza](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Benedict-de-Spinoza) and [John Locke](https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Locke), but they came to very different conclusions about political, social, and economic matters. A revolution seemed necessary to apply the ideas of [Montesquieu](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Montesquieu), [Voltaire](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Voltaire), or [Jean-Jacques Rousseau](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jean-Jacques-Rousseau). This [Enlightenment](https://www.britannica.com/event/Enlightenment-European-history) was spread among the educated classes by the many “societies of thought” that were founded at that time: [masonic](https://www.britannica.com/topic/order-of-Freemasons) lodges, agricultural societies, and reading rooms.

It is uncertain, however, whether revolution would have come without the added presence of a political crisis. Faced with the heavy expenditure that the wars of the 18th century entailed, the rulers of Europe sought to raise money by taxing the nobles and clergy, who in most countries had hitherto been exempt, To justify this, the rulers likewise [invoked](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/invoked) the arguments of advanced thinkers by adopting the role of “[enlightened despots](https://www.britannica.com/topic/enlightened-despotism).” This provoked reaction throughout Europe from the privileged bodies, diets. and estates. In [North America](https://www.britannica.com/place/North-America) this backlash caused the [American Revolution](https://www.britannica.com/event/American-Revolution), which began with the refusal to pay a tax imposed by the king of Great Britain. Monarchs tried to stop this reaction of the [aristocracy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/aristocracy), and both rulers and the privileged classes sought allies among the nonprivileged bourgeois and the peasants.

Although scholarly debate continues about the exact causes of the Revolution, the following reasons are commonly adduced: (1) the [bourgeoisie](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bourgeoisie) resented its exclusion from political power and positions of honour; (2) the peasants were acutely aware of their situation and were less and less willing to support the anachronistic and burdensome feudal system; (3) the philosophes had been read more widely in France than anywhere else; (4) French participation in the [American Revolution](https://www.britannica.com/event/American-Revolution) had driven the government to the brink of [bankruptcy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/bankruptcy); (5) France was the most populous country in Europe, and crop failures in much of the country in 1788, coming on top of a long period of economic difficulties, [compounded](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/compounded) existing restlessness; and (6) the French [monarchy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/monarchy), no longer seen as [divinely ordained](https://www.britannica.com/topic/divine-right-of-kings), was unable to adapt to the political and societal pressures that were being exerted on it.

**Aristocratic revolt, 1787–89**

The Revolution took shape in France when the controller general of finances, [Charles-Alexandre de Calonne](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Charles-Alexandre-de-Calonne), arranged the summoning of an assembly of “notables” (prelates, great noblemen, and a few representatives of the bourgeoisie) in February 1787 to propose reforms designed to eliminate the budget deficit by increasing the taxation of the privileged classes. The assembly refused to take responsibility for the reforms and suggested the calling of the [Estates-General](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Estates-General), which represented the [clergy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/clergy-Christianity), the [aristocracy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/aristocracy), and the [Third Estate](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Third-Estate) (the commoners) and which had not met since 1614. The efforts made by Calonne’s successors to enforce fiscal reforms in spite of resistance by the privileged classes led to the so-called revolt of the “aristocratic bodies,” notably that of the *[parlements](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Parlement)* (the most important courts of justice), whose powers were curtailed by the edict of May 1788.

During the spring and summer of 1788, there was unrest among the populace in [Paris](https://www.britannica.com/place/Paris), [Grenoble](https://www.britannica.com/place/Grenoble), [Dijon](https://www.britannica.com/place/Dijon), [Toulouse](https://www.britannica.com/place/Toulouse-France), [Pau](https://www.britannica.com/place/Pau), and [Rennes](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rennes). The king, [Louis XVI](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Louis-XVI), had to yield. He reappointed reform-minded [Jacques Necker](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jacques-Necker) as the finance minister and promised to [convene](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/convene) the Estates-General on May 5, 1789. He also, in practice, granted freedom of the press, and France was flooded with pamphlets addressing the reconstruction of the state. The elections to the Estates-General, held between January and April 1789, coincided with further disturbances, as the harvest of 1788 had been a bad one. There were practically no exclusions from the voting; and the electors drew up *cahiers de doléances*, which listed their grievances and hopes. They elected 600 deputies for the Third Estate, 300 for the nobility, and 300 for the clergy.

**French Revolution: DATE:** 1787 – 1799**, LOCATION:** [France](https://www.britannica.com/place/France)**, PARTICIPANTS:** [Bourgeoisie](https://www.britannica.com/topic/bourgeoisie)**,** [Montagnard](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Montagnard-French-history)**,** [Peasant](https://www.britannica.com/topic/peasantry)**,** [Philosophe](https://www.britannica.com/topic/philosophe)**,** [Sansculotte](https://www.britannica.com/topic/sansculotte)

**CAUSES: 1.** The growing popularity of the works of a number of intellectuals who argued for social reform

2. Crop failures in 1788 compounded existing economic restlessness

3. French participation in the American Revolution that drove the government to the

brink of bankruptcy

4. Resentment among the bourgeoisie about being excluded from political power

5. The French monarchy, no longer seen as divinely ordained, was unable to adapt to

the political and societal pressures being exerted on it

6. Widespread inequality between the rich and poor classes alongside growing

dissatisfaction with the antiquated feudal system among the poor

**OUTCOMES: 1.** Establishment of a republic in France

2. Establishment of civil equality in the country (but not in the French colonies)

and radical social change

3. The Reign of Terror, during which the Revolutionary government arrested

300,000 suspects, resulting in at least 25,000 deaths

4. The abolition of feudalism in France

5. The abolition of the monarchy and the deaths of King Louis XVI and Marie-

Antoinette

6. The rise to power of Napoleon Bonaparte

7. Wars with a number of other countries, including Austria, Prussia, and Great

Britain

**Additional KNOWledge:**

* The storming of the Bastille is still honored in France as a national holiday.
* The Jacobins attempted to eradicate Christianity in France.
* When Louis XVI was executed in January 1793, his severed head was paraded around for the crowd and was met with exclamations of "Vive la République!"
* The later Bolsheviks admired the French Revolution and especially the Jacobins, the extremist French revolutionaries who had instigated the Reign of Terror.

**Events of 1789:** The [Estates-General](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Estates-General) met at [Versailles](https://www.britannica.com/place/Versailles-France) on May 5, 1789. They were immediately divided over a fundamental issue: should they vote by head, giving the advantage to the [Third Estate](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Third-Estate), or by estate, in which case the two privileged orders of the realm might outvote the third? On June 17 the bitter struggle over this legal issue finally drove the deputies of the Third Estate to declare themselves the [National Assembly](https://www.britannica.com/topic/National-Assembly-historical-French-parliament); they threatened to proceed, if necessary, without the other two orders. They were supported by many of the parish priests, who outnumbered the aristocratic upper clergy among the church’s deputies. When royal officials locked the deputies out of their regular meeting hall on June 20, they occupied the king’s indoor tennis court (*[Jeu de Paume](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Jeu-de-Paume)*) and swore an [oath](https://www.britannica.com/event/Tennis-Court-Oath) not to disperse until they had given [France](https://www.britannica.com/place/France) a new constitution. The king grudgingly gave in and urged the nobles and the remaining clergy to join the assembly, which took the official title of [National Constituent Assembly](https://www.britannica.com/topic/National-Assembly-historical-French-parliament) on July 9; at the same time, however, he began gathering troops to dissolve it.

**EVENTS of the revolution:**

[Tennis Court Oath: June 20, 1789](https://www.britannica.com/event/Tennis-Court-Oath" \o "Tennis Court Oath)

[Civil Constitution of the Clergy: July 12, 1790](https://www.britannica.com/event/Civil-Constitution-of-the-Clergy" \o "Civil Constitution of the Clergy)

[French Revolutionary wars: April 1792 -](https://www.britannica.com/event/French-revolutionary-wars" \o "French Revolutionary wars)*[c.](https://www.britannica.com/event/French-revolutionary-wars" \o "French Revolutionary wars)*[1801](https://www.britannica.com/event/French-revolutionary-wars" \o "French Revolutionary wars)

[September Massacres: September 2, 1792 - September 6, 1792](https://www.britannica.com/event/September-Massacres" \o "September Massacres)

[Wars of the Vendée: February 1793 - July 1796](https://www.britannica.com/event/Wars-of-the-Vendee" \o "Wars of the Vendée)

[Reign of Terror: September 5, 1793 - July 27, 1794](https://www.britannica.com/event/Reign-of-Terror" \o "Reign of Terror)

[Thermidorian Reaction: July 27, 1794](https://www.britannica.com/event/Thermidorian-Reaction" \o "Thermidorian Reaction)

[Coup of 18 Fructidor: September 4, 1797](https://www.britannica.com/event/Coup-of-18-Fructidor" \o "Coup of 18 Fructidor)

[Coup of 18–19 Brumaire: November 9, 1799 - November 10, 1799](https://www.britannica.com/event/Coup-of-18-19-Brumaire" \o "Coup of 18–19 Brumaire)

These two months of prevarication at a time when the problem of maintaining food supplies had reached its climax infuriated the towns and the provinces. Rumours of an “aristocratic conspiracy” by the king and the privileged to overthrow the Third Estate led to the [Great Fear](https://www.britannica.com/event/Great-Fear) of July 1789, when the peasants were nearly panic-stricken. The gathering of troops around Paris and the dismissal of Necker provoked insurrection in the capital. On July 14, 1789, the Parisian crowd seized the [Bastille](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Bastille), a symbol of royal [tyranny](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tyranny). Again the king had to yield; visiting Paris, he showed his recognition of the [sovereignty](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sovereignty) of the people by wearing the [tricolour](https://www.britannica.com/topic/flag-of-France) [cockade](https://www.britannica.com/art/cockade-hat-decoration).

In the provinces, the Great Fear of July led the peasants to rise against their lords. The nobles and the bourgeois now took fright. The National [Constituent](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Constituent) Assembly could see only one way to check the peasants; on the night of [August](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/August) 4, 1789, it decreed the abolition of the feudal regime and of the [tithe](https://www.britannica.com/topic/tithe). Then on August 26 it introduced the [Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Declaration-of-the-Rights-of-Man-and-of-the-Citizen), proclaiming liberty, equality, the inviolability of property, and the right to resist oppression.

The decrees of August 4 and the Declaration were such [innovations](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/innovations) that the king refused to sanction them. The Parisians rose again and on October 5 marched to Versailles. The next day they brought the royal family back to Paris. The National Constituent Assembly followed the court, and in Paris it continued to work on the new constitution.

The French population participated actively in the new [political culture](https://www.britannica.com/topic/political-culture) created by the Revolution. Dozens of uncensored newspapers kept citizens abreast of events, and political clubs allowed them to voice their opinions. Public ceremonies such as the planting of “trees of liberty” in small villages and the Festival of Federation, held in Paris in 1790 on the first anniversary of the storming of the Bastille, were symbolic affirmations of the new order.

**The new regime;** The [National Constituent Assembly](https://www.britannica.com/topic/National-Assembly-historical-French-parliament) completed the abolition of [feudalism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/feudalism), suppressed the old “orders,” established civil equality among men (at least in metropolitan [France](https://www.britannica.com/place/France), since [slavery](https://www.britannica.com/topic/slavery-sociology) was retained in the colonies), and made more than half the adult male population eligible to vote, although only a small minority met the requirement for becoming a deputy. The decision to nationalize the lands of the [Roman Catholic Church](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Roman-Catholicism) in France to pay off the [public debt](https://www.britannica.com/topic/public-debt) led to a widespread redistribution of property. The [bourgeoisie](https://www.britannica.com/topic/bourgeoisie) and the peasant landowners were undoubtedly the chief beneficiaries, but some farm workers also were able to buy land. The land transfer was made through the sale of [assignats](https://www.britannica.com/topic/assignat), [bonds](https://www.britannica.com/topic/bond-finance) that were issued by the National [Constituent](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Constituent) Assembly and guaranteed by the value of the church lands. The bonds were to be retired once the transfer had been completed, but within a year, assignats in varying denominations were being printed as a form of Revolutionary [currency](https://www.britannica.com/topic/currency), with predictable [inflationary](https://www.britannica.com/topic/inflation-economics) effects. Having deprived the church of its resources, the assembly then resolved to reorganize the church, enacting the [Civil Constitution of the Clergy](https://www.britannica.com/event/Civil-Constitution-of-the-Clergy), which was rejected by Pope [Pius VI](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pius-VI) and by many of the French clergy. This produced a schism that aggravated the violence of the accompanying controversies.

The complicated administrative system of the [ancien régime](https://www.britannica.com/event/ancien-regime) was swept away by the National Constituent Assembly, which substituted a rational system based on the division of France into *départements*, districts, [cantons](https://www.britannica.com/topic/canton-European-government), and [communes](https://www.britannica.com/topic/commune-medieval-Western-Europe) administered by elected assemblies. The principles underlying the administration of [justice](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/justice) were also radically changed, and the system was adapted to the new administrative divisions. Significantly, the judges were to be elected.

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/96/696-050-C1122B3F/Gouvernements-1789.jpg)

*Gouvernements* before 1789.

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[](https://cdn.britannica.com/97/697-050-407A71BB/Revolutionary-departements-1789.jpg)

Revolutionary *départements* after 1789.

*Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.*

The National Constituent Assembly tried to create a monarchical regime in which the legislative and executive powers were shared between the king and an assembly. This regime might have worked if the king had really wanted to govern with the new authorities, but [Louis XVI](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Louis-XVI) was weak and vacillating and was the prisoner of his aristocratic advisers. On June 20–21, 1791, he tried to flee the country, but he was stopped at Varennes and brought back to Paris.

**Counterrevolution, regicide, and the**[**Reign of Terror**](https://www.britannica.com/event/Reign-of-Terror)

The events in [France](https://www.britannica.com/place/France) gave new hope to the revolutionaries who had been defeated a few years previously in the [United Provinces](https://www.britannica.com/place/United-Provinces-of-Central-America), [Belgium](https://www.britannica.com/place/Belgium), and [Switzerland](https://www.britannica.com/place/Switzerland). Likewise, all those who wanted changes in [England](https://www.britannica.com/place/England), [Ireland](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ireland), the [German](https://www.britannica.com/place/Germany) states, the [Austrian](https://www.britannica.com/place/Austria) lands, or [Italy](https://www.britannica.com/place/Italy) looked upon the Revolution with sympathy.

A number of French counterrevolutionaries—nobles, ecclesiastics, and some bourgeois—abandoned the struggle in their own country and emigrated. As “[émigrés](https://www.britannica.com/topic/emigre),” many formed armed groups close to the northeastern frontier of France and sought help from the rulers of Europe. The rulers were at first indifferent to the Revolution but began to worry when the [National Constituent Assembly](https://www.britannica.com/topic/National-Assembly-historical-French-parliament) proclaimed a revolutionary principle of international law—namely, that a people had the right of [self-determination](https://www.britannica.com/topic/self-determination). In accordance with this principle, the papal territory of [Avignon](https://www.britannica.com/place/Avignon) was reunited with France on September 13, 1791. By early 1792 both radicals, eager to spread the principles of the Revolution, and the king, hopeful that war would either strengthen his authority or allow foreign armies to rescue him, supported an aggressive policy. France declared war against [Austria](https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-Austria) on April 20, 1792.

In the first phase of the war (April–September 1792), France suffered defeats; [Prussia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Prussia) joined the war in July, and an Austro-Prussian army crossed the frontier and advanced rapidly toward Paris. Believing that they had been betrayed by the monarchy—indeed, France’s Austrian-born queen, [Marie-Antoinette](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marie-Antoinette-queen-of-France), had privately encouraged her brother, Holy Roman Emperor [Leopold II](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Leopold-II-Holy-Roman-emperor), to invade France as a counterrevolutionary measure—the Paris revolutionaries rose on [August](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/August) 10, 1792. They occupied [Tuileries Palace](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Tuileries-Palace), where Louis XVI was living, and imprisoned the royal family in the Temple. At the beginning of September, the Parisian crowd broke into the prisons and massacred the nobles and clergy held there. Meanwhile, volunteers were pouring into the army as the Revolution had awakened French [nationalism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/nationalism). In a final effort the French forces checked the Prussians on September 20, 1792, at Valmy. On the same day, a new assembly, the [National Convention](https://www.britannica.com/topic/National-Convention), met. The next day it proclaimed the abolition of the [monarchy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/monarchy) and the establishment of the [republic](https://www.britannica.com/topic/republic-government).

In the second phase of the war (September 1792–April 1793), the revolutionaries got the better of the enemy. [Belgium](https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-Belgium), the [Rhineland](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rhineland), [Savoy](https://www.britannica.com/place/Savoy-historical-region-Europe), and the county of [Nice](https://www.britannica.com/place/Nice) were occupied by French armies. Meanwhile, the National Convention was divided between the [Girondins](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Girondin), who wanted to organize a bourgeois republic in France and to spread the Revolution over the whole of Europe, and the [Montagnards](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Montagnard-French-history) (“Mountain Men”), who, with [Maximilien Robespierre](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Maximilien-Robespierre), wanted to give the lower classes a greater share in political and economic power. Despite efforts made by the Girondins, [Louis XVI](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Louis-XVI) was judged by the Convention, condemned to death for treason, and executed on January 21, 1793; Marie-Antoinette was [guillotined](https://www.britannica.com/topic/guillotine) nine months later.

In the spring of 1793, the war entered a third phase, marked by new French defeats. Austria, [Prussia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Prussia), and Great [Britain](https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-United-Kingdom) formed a coalition (later called the First Coalition), to which most of the rulers of Europe adhered. France lost Belgium and the Rhineland, and invading forces threatened Paris. These reverses, as those of 1792 had done, strengthened the extremists. The [Girondin](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Girondin) leaders were driven from the National Convention, and the Montagnards, who had the support of the Paris [sansculottes](https://www.britannica.com/topic/sansculotte) (workers, craftsmen, and shopkeepers), seized power and kept it until 9 Thermidor, year II, of the new [French republican calendar](https://www.britannica.com/science/French-republican-calendar) (July 27, 1794). The Montagnards were bourgeois liberals like the Girondins but under pressure from the sansculottes, and, in order to meet the requirements of defense, they adopted a [radical](https://www.britannica.com/topic/radical-ideologist) economic and social policy. They introduced the [Maximum](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Laws-of-Maximum) (government control of prices), taxed the rich, brought national assistance to the poor and to the disabled, declared that education should be free and compulsory, and ordered the confiscation and sale of the property of émigrés. These exceptional measures provoked violent reactions: the [Wars of the Vendée](https://www.britannica.com/event/Wars-of-the-Vendee), the “federalist” risings in [Normandy](https://www.britannica.com/place/Normandy) and in [Provence](https://www.britannica.com/place/Provence-region-France), the revolts of [Lyon](https://www.britannica.com/place/Lyon-France) and [Bordeaux](https://www.britannica.com/place/Bordeaux), and the insurrection of the [Chouans](https://www.britannica.com/event/Chouan) in [Brittany](https://www.britannica.com/place/Brittany-region-France). Opposition, however, was broken by the [Reign of Terror](https://www.britannica.com/event/Reign-of-Terror) (19 Fructidor, year I–9 Thermidor, year II [September 5, 1793–July 27, 1794]), which entailed the arrest of at least 300,000 suspects, 17,000 of whom were sentenced to death and executed while more died in prisons or were killed without any form of [trial](https://www.britannica.com/topic/trial-law). At the same time, the revolutionary government raised an army of more than one million men.

Thanks to this army, the war entered its fourth phase (beginning in the spring of 1794). A brilliant victory over the Austrians at [Fleurus](https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Fleurus) on 8 Messidor, year II (June 26, 1794), enabled the French to reoccupy Belgium. Victory made the Terror and the economic and social restrictions seem pointless. Robespierre, “the Incorruptible,” who had sponsored the restrictions, was overthrown in the National Convention on 9 [Thermidor](https://www.britannica.com/event/Thermidorian-Reaction), year II (July 27, 1794), and executed the following day. Soon after his fall the Maximum was abolished, the social laws were no longer applied, and efforts toward economic equality were abandoned. Reaction set in; the National Convention began to debate a new constitution; and, meanwhile, in the west and in the southeast, a royalist “[White Terror](https://www.britannica.com/topic/White-Terror-French-history)” broke out. Royalists even tried to seize power in Paris but were crushed by the young Gen. [Napoleon Bonaparte](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Napoleon-I) on 13 Vendémiaire, year IV (October 5, 1795). A few days later the National Convention dispersed.

**The**[**Directory**](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Directory-French-history)**and revolutionary expansion**: The constitution of the year III, which the [National Convention](https://www.britannica.com/topic/National-Convention) had approved, placed executive power in a [Directory](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Directory-French-history) of five members and legislative power in two chambers, the [Council of Ancients](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Council-of-Ancients) and the [Council of the Five Hundred](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Council-of-Five-Hundred-French-political-history) (together called the [Corps Législatif](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Corps-Legislatif)). This regime, a bourgeois [republic](https://www.britannica.com/topic/republic-government), might have achieved stability had not war perpetuated the struggle between revolutionaries and counterrevolutionaries throughout Europe. The war, moreover, embittered existing antagonisms between the Directory and the legislative councils in [France](https://www.britannica.com/place/France) and often gave rise to new ones. These disputes were settled by [coups d’état](https://www.britannica.com/topic/coup-detat), chiefly those of 18 Fructidor, year V (September 4, 1797), which removed the royalists from the Directory and from the councils, and of 18 Brumaire, year VIII (November 9, 1799), in which Bonaparte abolished the Directory and became the leader of France as its “first [consul](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Consulate-French-history).”

[**Napoleon I**](https://cdn.britannica.com/93/115193-050-6FFE7E0F/First-Consul-Bonaparte-canvas-Antoine-Jean-Gros-Legion-1802.jpg): After the victory of Fleurus, the progress of the French armies in Europe had continued.The [Rhineland](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rhineland) and [Holland](https://www.britannica.com/place/Netherlands) were occupied, and in 1795 Holland, [Tuscany](https://www.britannica.com/place/Tuscany), [Prussia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Prussia), and [Spain](https://www.britannica.com/place/Spain) negotiated for peace. When the French army under Bonaparte entered [Italy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-Italy) (1796), [Sardinia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Sardinia-island-Italy) came quickly to terms. Austria was the last to give in ([Treaty of Campo Formio](https://www.britannica.com/event/Treaty-of-Campo-Formio), 1797). Most of the countries occupied by the French were organized as “sister republics,” with institutions modeled on those of Revolutionary France.

Peace on the continent of Europe, however, did not end revolutionary expansion. The majority of the directors had inherited the [Girondin](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Girondin) desire to spread the Revolution over Europe and listened to the appeals of [Jacobins](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Jacobin-Club) abroad. Thus French troops in 1798 and 1799 entered[Switzerland](https://www.britannica.com/place/Switzerland), the [Papal States](https://www.britannica.com/place/Papal-States), and [Naples](https://www.britannica.com/place/Naples-Italy) and set up the [Helvetic](https://www.britannica.com/place/Helvetic-Republic), [Roman](https://www.britannica.com/place/Roman-Republic-historical-territory-Italy-1798-1799), and [Parthenopean](https://www.britannica.com/place/Parthenopean-Republic) republics. Great Britain, however, remained at war with France. Unable to effect a landing in England, the Directory, on Bonaparte’s request, decided to threaten the British in [India](https://www.britannica.com/place/India) by occupying [Egypt](https://www.britannica.com/place/Egypt). An expeditionary corps under Bonaparte easily occupied [Malta](https://www.britannica.com/place/Malta) and Egypt, but the squadron that had convoyed it was destroyed by [Horatio Nelson](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Horatio-Nelson)’s fleet at the [Battle of the Nile](https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-the-Nile) on 14 Thermidor, year VI (August 1, 1798). This disaster encouraged the formation of a [Second Coalition](https://www.britannica.com/topic/War-of-the-Second-Coalition) of powers alarmed by the progress of the Revolution. This coalition of Austria, [Russia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Russia), [Turkey](https://www.britannica.com/place/Turkey), and Great Britain won great successes during the spring and summer of 1799 and drove back the French armies to the frontiers. Bonaparte thereupon returned to France to exploit his own great [prestige](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prestige) and the disrepute into which the military reverses had brought the government. His [coup d’état of 18 Brumaire](https://www.britannica.com/event/Coup-of-18-19-Brumaire) overthrew the Directory and substituted the consulate. Although Bonaparte proclaimed the end of the Revolution, he himself was to spread it in new forms throughout Europe.Bottom of Form

**Great Fear**: French **Grande Peur**, (1789) in the [French Revolution](https://www.britannica.com/event/French-Revolution), a period of panic and riot by peasants and others amid rumours of an “aristocratic conspiracy” by the king and the privileged to overthrow the [Third Estate](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Third-Estate). The gathering of troops around Paris provoked insurrection, and on July 14 the Parisian rabble seized the [Bastille](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Bastille). In the provinces the peasants rose against their lords, attacking châteaus and destroying feudal documents. To check the peasants, the [National Constituent Assembly](https://www.britannica.com/topic/National-Assembly-historical-French-parliament) decreed the abolition of the feudal regime and introduced the [Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Declaration-of-the-Rights-of-Man-and-of-the-Citizen).

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