**French Revolution**

**Bridging reading document**

The French Revolution was a watershed event in modern European history that began in 1789 and ended in the late 1790s with the ascent of Napoleon Bonaparte. During this period, French citizens razed and redesigned their country’s political landscape, uprooting centuries-old institutions such as absolute monarchy and the feudal system. The upheaval was caused by widespread discontent with the French monarchy and the poor economic policies of King Louis XVI, who met his death by guillotine, as did his wife Marie Antoinette. Although it failed to achieve all of its goals and at times degenerated into a chaotic bloodbath, the French Revolution played a critical role in shaping modern nations by showing the world the power inherent in the will of the people.

**Causes of the French Revolution**

As the 18th century drew to a close, France’s costly involvement in the **American Revolution,** and extravagant spending by King **Louis XVI** and his predecessor, had left the country on the brink of bankruptcy. Not only were the royal coffers depleted, but two decades of poor harvests, drought, cattle disease and skyrocketing bread prices had kindled unrest among peasants and the urban poor. Many expressed their desperation and resentment toward a regime that imposed heavy taxes – yet failed to provide any relief – by rioting, looting and striking.In the autumn of 1786, Louis XVI’s controller general, Charles Alexandre de Calonne, proposed a financial reform package that included a universal land tax from which the privileged classes would no longer be exempt. To gain support for these measures and preventl a growing aristocratic revolt, the king summoned the **Estates-General** – an assembly representing France’s clergy, nobility and middle class – for the first time since 1614.

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. 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, many of whom owned land, had attained an improved standard of living and 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 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 but came to very different conclusions about political, social, and economic matters. A revolution seemed necessary to apply the ideas of **Montesquieu**, **Voltaire**, or **Jean-Jacques Rousseau**. This **Enlightenment** 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.

The terms that are highlighted in red need to be researched a little bit so that you are familiar when we start the course. There are also some other individuals that you could research to get to grips with the key characters of the revolution:

* Louis XVI
* Marie Antoinette
* Abbe Sieyes
* Maximilien Robespierre
* Napoleon Bonaparte

I have already emailed out two short documentaries that you can watch, and you can also have a look at the following website for more information:

<https://alphahistory.com/frenchrevolution/>