



The First Phase of the French Revolution, 1789-91

This is a transcript of the [First Phase of the French Revolution, 1789-91](https://www.mrallsophistory.com/podcast/first-phase-of-the-french-revolution-1789-91) podcast from www.mrallsophistory.com

In the last podcast we explored the political, social and economic pressures within France up to the 14th July 1789. On that day, events took a violent and revolutionary turn when a Parisian mob, fearing a royal coup d'état against the National Assembly, stormed the Bastille. Their aim was not to overthrow the King, nor destroy the fortress, but rather to seize gunpowder. The destruction of the Bastille – a symbol of monarchical power – was an unplanned effect. In order to protect themselves against a possible royal reaction, the people of Paris then formed a National Guard. Outside the capital, a wave of violence known as The Great Fear swept across large parts of rural France. This combination of rural and urban action is therefore seen by many as the true start of the French Revolution. The diverse interests of the aristocracy, the merchant strata, the urban lower classes, and the peasantry seemed to have converged together in action against the Ancien Regime.

However, the reality is that the revolution unfolded in a series of phases over the next few years. Themes that we will explore in this podcast include the king's weaknesses, conflict between different classes and ideologies, economic pressures and financial instability, arguments concerning the role of the church in France, urban and rural violence, and the role of foreign powers.

With the limits of the monarch's power exposed by the events of July 1789, the fledgling National Assembly worked to consolidate its position in government. This can be seen through the gradual removal of feudalism and the establishment of a constitutional monarchy between 1789 and 1791. The National Assembly worked quickly, with their meeting on August 4, 1789, concluding with far-reaching social and political pledges from the upper classes. It was at this meeting that the deputies agreed to establish a constitutional monarchy and draft a constitution. The aristocrats agreed to surrender their feudal privileges and instead charge the peasants rent for their land. Meanwhile, progressive clerics gave up their right to a form of taxation in the shape of the tithe.

Such radical shifts were further developed when, on August 26th 1789, the Assembly produced the "Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen." This document – which aimed to set out the fundamental rights of every person – was somewhat more radical than the earlier American Bill of Rights from which it drew inspiration. It confirmed the end of feudal privileges, and laid the foundations for the establishment of a constitutional monarchy.

The problem was that the King withheld his approval for both the August Decrees and the Declaration of the Rights of Man. He saw both as a direct challenge to his power and refused to accept the limits they set. By October, however, the people of Paris were growing restless



and hungry. After hearing that a regiment of the King's Guard had mocked and trampled on the colours of the revolution, and instead toasted the white flag of the Bourbon monarchy, a group of up to 7,000 Parisienne women marched to the Palace of Versailles. Incensed by the attitude of the King to the plight of his people, the crowd – supported by around 20,000 troops from the National Guard – forced Louis to approve the August Decrees and the Declaration of the Rights of Man in what became known as the October Days. They then got him to agree to return from Versailles to live in the Tuileries palace in the heart of Paris – the heads of some of his guards stuck on pikes leading the procession.

The Constituent Assembly faced an unenviable list of problems. Not only did they have to transform France into a limited monarchy from an absolutist one by through producing a constitution, they also needed to ensure the new system of government was capable of repairing the existing damage to France. They had to rebuild the economy and decide how the government should be financed; recognise the breadth of French society by decentralising administration and giving more power to local authorities; instigate the ideals of the Enlightenment by developing a more efficient, uniform and humane system of laws and justice and agree a new relationship between Church and State.

This final point was settled through the Civil Constitution of the Clergy in 1790, which gave the French government control over the church. Under the terms of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, the government paid church salaries and maintained the churches which – for many parish priests – meant a higher regular clerical income. This meant that tithes and other financial privileges for the clergy were abolished. The hierarchy of the church was changed to forbid pluralism – that's the holding of more than one church office – and bishops and other clergy were elected rather than appointed by the Pope. The Civil Constitution of the Clergy effectively transformed France's Roman Catholic Church into a branch of the state.

A lot of the reforms made under the Civil Constitution of the Clergy didn't really meet with any hostility. For example, civil rights and toleration were granted to Protestants and, later, to Jews. But some of the changes led to a struggle over authority. Church property was confiscated and sold off to provide funds for the new government. Furthermore, the National Assembly demanded that all clergy swear an oath of loyalty to the state, which deeply divided Catholics and left a legacy of church-state conflict. Only a handful of bishops and just over half of other clergy swore the oath. They became known as jurors, or juring priests, and were generally seen as being on the side of the nation and the revolution. Those who refused to swear the oath of loyalty became known as non-jurors or refractory priests. Associated with royalists and counter-revolutionaries, they had a particularly good following in the strongly Catholic parts of France such as the west and south. Although they had the support of the Pope, they were seen as enemies of the revolution and – as the revolution grew more radicalised – were targeted for their refusal to swear the oath.



The confiscation of church land, which was one of the more controversial decisions of the entire revolutionary period, was done in order to provide funds for the new government. The land was used as security behind the printing of assignats, a series of interest-bearing notes that entitles the bearer to certain privileges in the purchase of church land. The idea was that the state would retire the notes as the land was sold, but in reality the assignats themselves began circulating as paper currency. The government met the demand for assignats by simply printing more, but – with a finite amount of land available as security – this led to inflation. Within 6 years they had lost 99% of their value. However, it did mean that future governments were able to pay off their creditors with cheap money.

By the time the drafting of the Constitution was completed in 1791, therefore, a number of significant changes had already taken place in France. The Constitution established a moderate constitutional monarchy with a system of indirect elections. “Active” Citizens, those who paid taxes amounting to 3 days labour could vote. Those who didn’t pay this much in tax were known as “Passive” Citizens and could not vote. In total, 1/3 of adult males were denied the franchise. However, it did mean that 2/3 of adult males could vote which was a hugely progressive step from the Ancien Regime although it did mean that political power was kept in the hands of the middle-class rather than turned over to the peasants and urban workers.

In addition to voting regulations, the Constitution of 1791 laid out details regarding the operation of government. The king was not able to introduce and pass his own laws – this could only be done by the Legislative Assembly. However, he was given a “suspensive” veto which he could use to prevent the passage of laws for 4 years. In order to improve governmental accountability the king’s ministers were held responsible for their own actions. Meanwhile, the permanent, elected, single chamber would hold the king to account and had the power to grant taxation. In order to rationalise the administration of France, the country was divided into 83 departments. Furthermore, an independent judiciary was introduced.

For some, the pace and extent of the changes taking place in France were too much and, throughout 1791 and 1792, the initial revolutionary coalition splintered. The nobility were particularly concerned with the course of the revolution, and many chose to flee the country rather than stay and be subject to the new system of government. Known as émigrés, many settled in Germany and other nearby European states, where they agitated against the revolution.

Within the revolutionary bourgeoisie, however, a crucial split began to emerge between the so-called Jacobins and Girondins. Jacobin clubs, so-called because the first one in existence held its meetings in the library of a former Jacobin monastery in Paris, existed all over France. By just 1791 there were already 90 separate branches. Their membership was primarily lawyers and other professionals. Although originally a meeting place for moderates who supported a constitutional monarchy, these clubs quickly established a reputation as radical



organizations that wanted a republic. The Girondins, who will talk about more in the next podcast, were also originally Jacobins. However, they assumed a more moderate position than the radicals did and later split broke away from club. Don't assume that the Girondins were conservatives, however. They were more than ready to go war to protect the revolution and even to spread it beyond France, but they were more moderate and cautious in their approach.

As well as these internal problems, the revolution was threatened by foreign powers. The French Revolution was viewed with alarm by the other monarchies of Europe, and this led to fear within France that the King himself was conspiring with foreign powers to topple the revolutionary government. On the night of the 20th-21st June 1791, the King reinforced the people's lack of trust in him. In what became known as the Flight to Varennes, Louis fled the Tuilleries Palace under cover of darkness. Whether he intended to meet up with his Austrian brother-in-law and launch a counter-revolution, or simply move himself aware from Paris in order to renegotiate the terms of the constitution is unclear. What is known is that he was identified in the town of Varennes, 30 miles away from the Austrian border, from where he was brought back to Paris – his reputation in tatters.

While the assembly tussled over what direction the fledgling government should take now that the king has proved untrustworthy, they temporarily suspended his authority on 16th July 1791. Some Jacobins, under the leadership of Robespierre, pushed for him to be put on trial, although the majority opposed such radical action and argued in favour of preserving the constitutional monarchy. Outside the assembly, however, radical forces were growing. They demanded that the king be removed from power and put on trial.

The division amongst the revolutionaries was most clearly seen at the demonstration at the Champs de Mars in Paris on 17th July 1791. Organised by another radical political club – the Cordeliers Club – it attracted fifty thousand people who demanded the king be put on trial. But the Paris Commune, dominated by moderates, feared that the demonstration would turn into a riot and ordered the National Guard – led by Lafayette – to disperse the crowd. The National Guard, effectively the military wing of the moderate revolutionaries in Paris, opened fire and killed fifty radical protesters. It was clear that the revolution was far from over.