What was the French Revolution?

KS3 KS4 Ages 11-18 ⏰ 4 min read

The French Revolution (1789–1799) was one of the most dramatic and consequential events in modern history. It ended the French monarchy, dismantled the aristocracy, proclaimed the rights of citizens, executed thousands, and ultimately brought Napoleon Bonaparte to power — a sequence of events that reshaped Europe and spread ideas about liberty, equality, and democracy across the world.

What caused it?

France in 1789 was in crisis. The country was essentially bankrupt after decades of expensive wars (including supporting the American Revolution). The harvest had failed in 1788, causing widespread hunger. The tax system was grotesquely unfair — the aristocracy and clergy paid almost no tax, while the common people were crushed by it. And Enlightenment ideas — about natural rights, rational government, and the legitimacy of popular sovereignty — were spreading rapidly through the educated middle class.

Imagine a country where the richest people pay no taxes, the poorest people are starving due to a bad harvest, the government is bankrupt, and educated people are reading books arguing that ordinary people have the right to govern themselves. Add in a weak king who couldn't make decisions under pressure and a court living in extraordinary luxury at Versailles while people went hungry in Paris. The Revolution wasn't a surprise — in hindsight, it was almost inevitable. Injustice, inequality, and hunger, combined with new ideas about rights, is a very reliable recipe for revolution.

What happened?

In June 1789, the common people's representatives broke away and declared themselves a National Assembly. On 14 July, the Bastille fortress-prison in Paris was stormed — a symbolic act that marks the revolution's beginning. The Declaration of the Rights of Man was proclaimed. The king and queen were eventually arrested; Louis XVI was executed by guillotine in January 1793, Marie Antoinette in October.

Then came the **Reign of Terror** (1793–94): radical Jacobins, led by Robespierre, executed "enemies of the revolution" at an industrial rate — approximately 17,000

officially executed and many more dying in prison. Eventually the Terror consumed its own leaders; Robespierre himself was guillotined in 1794.

What were the lasting effects?

The Revolution spread the ideas of liberty, equality, and popular sovereignty across Europe, inspiring revolutions for over a century. It produced Napoleon, who spread French legal and administrative reforms across a conquered Europe. The metric system, secular education, legal equality regardless of birth — these French Revolutionary ideas became cornerstones of the modern world. The modern political spectrum of "left" and "right" comes directly from the seating arrangement in the French Revolutionary Assembly: conservatives on the right, radicals on the left.

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