

Since 1789 European and indeed world politics has been a struggle for and against the principles of the French Revolution.

—E.J. Hobsbawm¹

BITAIN WENT THROUGH a series of upheavals during the seventeenth century that transformed it politically and placed it on a different political development path from most of the rest of Europe. But however dramatic and consequential Britain's seventeenth-century upheavals were, they were nothing compared to what occurred in France at the end of the eighteenth century. The French Revolution not only transformed France more profoundly than the Glorious Revolution or civil wars did Britain, it also exerted a direct and lasting impact on the course of European and world history in a way the British upheavals did not. Indeed, to paraphrase the great historian Eric Hobsbawm, since 1789 European and indeed world politics can be understood as a struggle for and against the principles of the French Revolution.²

Why was the French Revolution so pivotal in French, European, and world history? France's position in Europe during this time is surely part of the answer. Unlike England during the seventeenth century, France at the end of the eighteenth century was continental Europe's most powerful and admired state; its absolutist monarchy was viewed by other European monarchs with awe. Its culture and language dominated Europe, and elites across the continent were intensely Francophone. Moreover, the revolution spilled beyond France's borders, as Napoleon marched across Europe and its ideas spread around the globe. For these and other reasons, events in France

influenced eighteenth-century Europe in a way events in seventeenth-century Britain did not. But most important was the nature of the French Revolution itself: it was not merely a transition from one type of political regime to another, but rather the greatest, most radical threat the ancien régime had yet experienced, challenging not merely its political structures, but its social and economic ones as well.

This chapter will examine the French Revolution and how it changed the course of French and European history. Although the revolution had many causes, at its heart lay the nature of the ancien régime. By the 1780s the weaknesses embedded within the ancien régime, along with economic, demographic, and ideological developments, helped create a crisis. However, once change began, so interconnected were the political, social, and economic structures of the ancien régime that any attempt at reform in one sphere inexorably impacted the others. And once the system began to unravel, deep divisions in ancien régime society, the radical goals of the revolutionaries, and the dangerous domestic and international situations created by the monarchy's collapse sent the situation spiraling out of control.

The Background

As noted in chapter 2, the ancien régime in France achieved many successes, particularly in the realm of state-building. During the seventeenth century absolutist monarchs ended a period of chaos, confusion, and instability and turned France into the dominant power in Europe. They did so by asserting dominance over their territory, subjects, and competitors, particularly the nobility and the church, and by centralizing authority. However, the price paid for these accomplishments was high. In essence French monarchs bought acquiescence in the centralization of authority by confirming, and in some cases augmenting, the privileges of particular provinces and groups. Although this did enable kings to stabilize France after a period of intense disorder (see chapter 2), as conditions changed during the eighteenth century the tradeoffs and compromises built into the French state began destabilizing the ancien régime instead.

One critical change occurred in the realm of ideas. French kings based their claim to rule on divine authority (“the divine right of kings,” see chapter 2), and political power was inherited. The social order accompanying this form of rule was, as noted, based on privilege: everything from access to economic resources to the payment or non-payment of taxes, to the type of justice one was subjected to, was determined by membership in a particular

group or residence in a particular province. In this world, the privileged and non-privileged were not just politically, but also socially and economically distinct. As Abbé Sieyès, who would play a critical role in the French Revolution (see below), once wrote, “The privileged individual considers himself, along with his colleagues, as constituting a distinct order, a nation of the select within the nation. . . . The privileged actually come to see themselves as another species of man.” Similarly, Tocqueville said of the aristocracy that “[t]hey scarcely even think of themselves as belonging to the same humanity”³ as the rest of us. In addition, in the *ancien régime* people were subjects rather than citizens, duty bound to obey their ruler as God’s representative on earth. Challenges to this political and social order began as early as the Reformation, which began breaking down ideas about divine sanction and inequality before God. Such challenges grew more widespread and forceful from the eighteenth century on, expanding from the religious to the intellectual and political spheres.⁴ The Enlightenment, of course, took aim at many aspects of the old regime, including the legitimacy of absolutism and inherited social hierarchies.⁵ Perhaps most importantly, “natural rights” advocates, social contract theorists, and others began asserting that the right to rule depended not on birth but on fulfilling certain obligations or ensuring certain outcomes. John Locke, for example, famously declared “life, liberty and [property]” to be fundamental rights, meaning they could not, therefore, be subject to the whims of monarchs.”⁶ Rousseau, meanwhile, although a very different thinker, similarly shook up traditional beliefs about governance by laying out a “revolutionary notion of equal citizenship and the concept of public opinion that would be a court of appeal against the unjust actions of the state. Society, through the social contract, granted the state its autonomy in return for the state’s recognition of the innate natural rights of the individual.”⁷ In addition to questioning the nature or foundations of the right to rule, Enlightenment thinkers also advanced a vision of a community made up of autonomous and equal individuals that offered a stark alternative to the hierarchical and privileged social order at the core of the *ancien régime*. Alongside these new ideas, the basis of privilege had also changed: in the past social hierarchies had been justified by services that the privileged groups rendered to king and country, but by the eighteenth century the nobility in particular no longer performed these functions, so there was “very little justification by way of social utility to support [their] lofty and parasitic position.”⁸ Enlightenment thinking was undoubtedly most prevalent among members of the educated elite, but as Robert Darnton and other scholars have shown, radical and subversive ideas spread fairly rapidly and widely in late eighteenth-century France, even without the benefit of Twitter and Facebook.

Alongside ideational changes, economic development during the late eighteenth century also proved destabilizing as it re-shaped France's social structure. Traditionally, society was divided into three estates—the church, the nobility, and the rest—but by the end of the eighteenth century this tripartite structure no longer corresponded to the distribution of interest, property, or productive capacity. The third estate, for example, had grown dramatically in size and economic importance and included a growing middle class or bourgeoisie that saw itself as the most industrious and dynamic sector of society. By some estimates, for example, there were “more than twice as many bourgeois under Louis XVI as in the last years of Louis XIV”⁹ and this group resented the privileges enjoyed by the first and second estates—or at least disliked being kept from them.¹⁰ The first and second estates, meanwhile, had become more differentiated and internally divided. The nobility, for example, included, members of the “nobility of the robe” and “nobility of the sword” (the former being more recently ennobled state servants and the latter's nobility emanating from feudal military service), and the economic resources, interests, and viewpoints of different parts of the nobility became less homogenous over time. Within the Church, meanwhile, differences between wealthy bishops and relatively poor local clergy increased. Economic development, in short, made the *ancien régime's* tripartite organization of social, economic, and political power anachronistic and generated tensions within and between various groups.

In addition, although the eighteenth century was generally prosperous, the benefits of growth were unequally distributed. Urban wage earners, for example, did less well than others since prices rose more than wages. Small peasants also did relatively poorly. Furthermore, economic growth was uneven and the economy stagnated about a decade before the revolution. The effects of this slowdown were aggravated by a major economic crisis in 1787, triggered, as these things often were in pre-capitalist times, by bad harvests. By the late 1780s, in short, economic suffering was extensive and concentrated in the lower orders; economic development had exacerbated social tensions and resentments; and the Enlightenment had corroded the legitimacy of the *ancien régime* and the system of privilege that supported it. But dissatisfaction alone does not a revolution make. As one of history's great revolutionaries once noted, “The mere existence of privations is not enough to cause an insurrection; if it was, the masses would always be in revolt.”¹¹ Instead, the real problem was that by the 1780s the *ancien régime* faced both growing domestic and international challenges *and* was unable to respond successfully to them.¹²

The clearest and most consequential example of this was in the realm of finances.¹³ The French *ancien régime* was built upon a system of financing that seems peculiar to us today (see chapter 2). As the great historian Albert Cobban characterized it, Louis XIV bequeathed to France a fairly modern state paired with a semi-medieval system of financing.¹⁴ As we know, this financial system was a result or manifestation of the tradeoff that lay at the heart of the *ancien régime*: in order to keep the support or at least acquiescence of the adversaries of absolutism, the crown preserved and even augmented many privileges. (As one scholar sardonically put it, absolutism can therefore be viewed as “no more than a gigantic system of bribery of those whom the crown found it worthwhile to bribe.”¹⁵) And one of the most tangible benefits of privilege was exemption from many taxes. But since taxes are generally the modern state’s primary source of revenue, French kings were financially constrained by the privileges they depended on to rule. The tension or even contradiction between a fairly modern state and a semi-medieval financing system became increasingly clear over the course of the eighteenth century. Ironically, this was partially a consequence of the *ancien régime*’s success: as France’s absolutist monarchs grew more powerful, so did their international aspirations. In particular, in order to maintain its great power position France became involved in wars throughout the eighteenth century. Making matters worse—from the French perspective, that is—the *ancien régime* found itself facing new international rivals, particularly Great Britain, which, partially as a result of developments discussed in the previous chapter, had a more flexible and efficient political and financial system than France. The French confronted the British in the Seven Years’ War (1756–1763), which ended with France losing most of its overseas holdings and navy and accumulating debt that by the end of the 1760s was devouring more than 60 percent of state expenditures to service.¹⁶ France then got involved in the American War of Independence, taking the side of the rebellious colonists against the British. (If there was ever a good example of the blind force of international ambition, France’s absolutist regime taking the side of the liberty-loving, democratically minded colonists was it.) Although the colonists’ victory against the British bought some revenge for France’s loss in 1763, the price paid was very high. French participation in the American War of Independence made the ideals of the American Revolution widely known and fashionable in France, further undermining the legitimacy of the *ancien régime*. One aristocratic observer remarked, “I was singularly struck . . . to see such a unanimous outbreak of lively and general interest in the revolt of a people against a king. . . . I was far from being the only one whose heart

then throbbed at the newborn liberty reawakening to shake off the yoke of arbitrary power.”¹⁷

In addition, participation in the American Revolution worsened the ancien régime’s finances. The limited taxation capacity of the ancien régime meant that participation in the war was financed primarily by borrowing. The ironies here are delicious, with the ancien régime’s inability to raise taxes reflecting “inversely, the well-known American principle of ‘no taxation, without representation,’” since the privileged groups took “the position that if they were not represented in government they were under no obligation to pay taxes to it.”¹⁸ On top of an already very high debt burden, additional expenditures for this war helped push the state near bankruptcy.¹⁹ It is important to stress, however, that this was *not* due to the absolute amount of expenditures, but rather to the inability of the ancien régime’s financial system to pay for them. A comparison with Britain is illustrative. Although France was richer and more populous, the British state taxed more extensively *and* borrowed more cheaply. By the end of the 1780s the British tax burden was higher in absolute terms than the French and took up nearly twice as high a share of per capita incomes (see Figure 4.1).²⁰

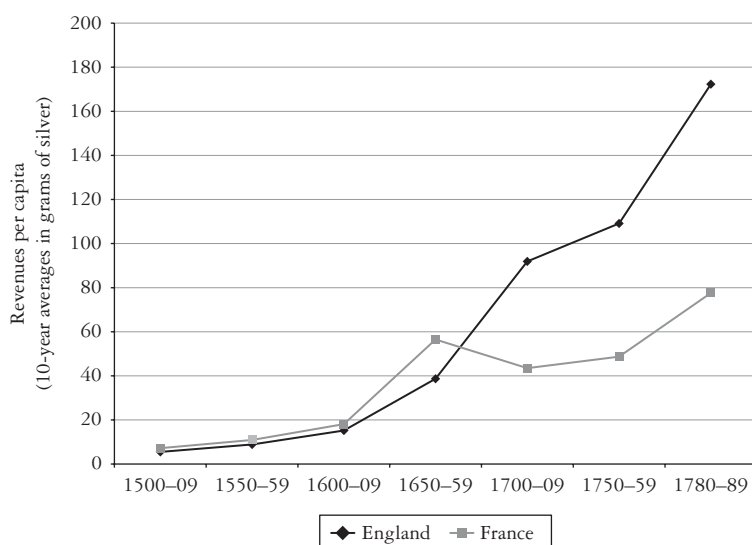


FIGURE 4.1 Annual revenue per capita of France and England (ten-year averages in grams of silver), 1500–1789.

Source: Mark Dinello, “Fiscal Centralization, Limited Government, and Public Revenues in Europe, 1650–1913,” *Journal of Economic History* 69, 1 (2009): 48–103. Dinello, *Political Transformation and Public Finances, Europe 1650–1913* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); K. Kivanç Karaman and Şevket Pamuk, *The Journal of Economic History* 70, 3 (September 2010).

Moreover both levels *and* rates of increase in taxes were higher in Britain than France: in fact, despite growing need, the share of taxes collected per capita seems to have fallen in France over the course of the eighteenth century.²¹ The French state's relatively limited taxation capacity influenced the cost of its borrowing as well: since it was unable to raise taxes as easily or efficiently as the British to repay loans, markets extracted "a risk premium for holding even the most secure debt obligations of the French monarchy."²² These differential financial capabilities help explain why Britain was able to pay off the cost of war, recover quickly from defeat in the American War of Independence, and even go on to improve its international position afterwards, while France ended up crippled by its "victory." It also explains why taxation created more resentment in France than England: in the former, privileged groups and provinces avoided paying taxes, whereas in the latter everyone, including the aristocracy, paid taxes.²³

Although the financial fallout from participation in the American War of Independence pushed the ancien régime to its breaking point, these structural problems had been clear to perspicacious reformers for some time. The problem was that by the 1780s it was no longer possible to solve these problems without a "renegotiation" of the tradeoff that lay at the heart of the ancien régime: the system of privilege.

Towards the end of Louis XV's reign (1715–1774), for example, his principle adviser, Maupeou, tried to reform the system of privilege and the *parlements* that protected privileged groups and provinces.²⁴ These reforms were, however, vociferously resisted and cost Louis XV much of his popularity. Indeed, largely as a result of these efforts, Louis XV became so disliked that when he died in May 1774 he had to be buried quickly for fear that prolonged ceremony or mourning might provoke a popular outcry.

Given this, one of the first moves made by Louis XV's successor, Louis XVI, was dismissing Maupeou and restoring the *parlements*. This increased Louis XVI's popularity, but the problems facing the ancien régime were too great to be avoided, no matter how much the new king preferred to do so. Louis XVI's subsequent appointment of Ann Robert Jacques Turgot as his controller-general (essentially, minister of finance) indicated that he recognized the need for a new approach. Turgot was an economic theorist and a former civil servant and therefore seemed to have the intellectual and practical experience necessary to tackle the ancien régime's financial challenges. In particular, Turgot understood the danger posed by French involvement in the American War of Independence and warned the king that without reforms "the first gunshot will drive the state to bankruptcy."²⁵ Despite such warnings, the king entered the war, and to deal with the financial

fallout, Turgot proposed restructuring the taxation system by ending some monopolies, guilds, and other restrictions on economic activity; cutting government handouts; and creating a national body to advise the king on taxation. In response, aristocratic society united “from top to bottom”²⁶ and the king, under pressure from the queen and other anti-reform aristocrats at court, backed down. By the end of 1776 Turgot and his reforms were gone.

Turgot’s successor was Jacques Necker, an immensely rich and popular Swiss Protestant banker.²⁷ Necker understood the need for reform and began modernizing the financial bureaucracy. But Necker was unwilling to directly confront the system of privilege and so financed French participation in the American War of Independence with loans carrying increasingly high interest rates. Necker also made a fateful move in 1781, publishing his report to the king (*Compte rendu au roi*) and thereby bringing public opinion into the debate about state finances for the first time. The report presented a probably misleading picture of the ancien régime’s financial health, making it appear as though state revenues met expenditures.²⁸ As a result, when the inevitable financial reckoning came, it shocked a now-activated public opinion. However, despite the relatively moderate nature of Necker’s reforms, he too displeased the queen and other reactionaries and was thus ultimately dismissed by the king.

Necker’s eventual successor was Charles Calonne. Calonne understood the desperate situation, but attempted to put off reforms as long as possible because he understood their social and political costs. By 1786, however, the game was up: Calonne informed Louis XVI that the state was insolvent and reform could not wait. As he put it, “The only effective remedy, the only course left to take, the only means of managing finally to put the finances truly in order, must consist in revivifying the entire State by recasting all that is vicious in its constitution.”²⁹ Calonne suggested calling an Assembly of Notables, stocked with handpicked members of the privileged orders, to provide the crown with the support and financial aid it needed.

Much to Calonne and the king’s chagrin, however, when the Assembly convened in 1787 it refused to play along. Calonne told the Assembly that “the special provisions, exemptions and immunities . . . made the task of Government impossible,”³⁰ but the notables insisted that changing part of the tradeoff at the heart of the ancien régime without the other was a non-starter: financial and political reform had to go hand in hand. In particular, the nobles were unwilling to give up privileges without a devolution of political power back to them.³¹ What began, in other words, as a financial problem quickly morphed into a political one,³² and the options available to the ancien régime, as we will see is so often the case with dictatorships, for

dealing with its problems had narrowed to either widening political participation or resorting to greater repression.³³

Faced with the notables' demands, and under pressure from the queen and other advisers, Louis XVI's resolve broke and he dismissed Calonne. By now, however, the dire financial situation was out in the open and the country was in the midst of its worst economic crisis of the century, with unemployment above 50 percent, rising prices, and a disastrous harvest causing widespread suffering—all of which made it harder, of course, for subjects who had to pay taxes to do so. As Ernest Labrousse, an eminent scholar of the crisis, wrote, "It was not so much that [taxes] increased, but that he who had to bear it weakened."³⁴ Against this backdrop, the privileged orders made another critical move, insisting that only an Estates-General, a national assembly representing the three estates of the realm that had not met since 1614, could deal with the challenges at hand. Finally recognizing there was no way out,³⁵ the king relented and announced he would call an Estates-General for 1789. The notables assumed that the Estates-General would enable them to force through political changes they had long desired. Instead, of course, the airing of their demands unleashed a chain reaction of pent-up dissatisfaction that made limiting changes to the political realm impossible; what began as an attempt at political transition led instead to the greatest revolution the world had ever known.

The Course of the Revolution

Louis XVI's consent to the summoning of an Estates-General in August 1788 confirmed that the ancien régime could not meet the challenges it faced.³⁶ The question now became: what would come next? In order to answer this question we need to understand some crucial legacies or features of the ancien régime. The ancien régime, like most dictatorships, did not allow the development of any authoritative national political institutions capable of challenging the dictator's (monarch's) authority. Citizens, therefore, lacked experience in public affairs or popular organizing and "hardly understood what 'the people' meant."³⁷ In addition, and again, like many dictatorships, the ancien régime fostered a society where citizens were "divided into closed, self-regarding groups"³⁸ where little "trace of any feeling for the public weal is anywhere to be found."³⁹ The result was that pre-revolutionary French society was divided and dissatisfied but lacked institutions or traditions of political activity, compromise, or accommodation capable of dealing with these divisions and discontent. As a result,

once the king stepped into the background with the calling of the Estates-General, the country descended into a political vacuum and—without national political institutions, traditions, or norms to guide or respond to it—the discontent and divisions that had been brewing under the surface exploded. Initially, the goal was reforming the ancien régime. That there was, by this point, a widespread recognition of the need for reform is confirmed by the lists of grievances (*Cabiers de Doléances*) members of the three estates had been invited to submit to the king in the period leading up to the Estates-General. These *Cabiers* revealed a fairly broad consensus on the need to end absolutist rule. Most also insisted on the principle of “no taxation without representation”: going forward, only taxes approved by the Estates-General would be considered legitimate.⁴⁰ However, despite this broad *negative* consensus on the need to end absolutist rule, as time went on, reaching any *positive* consensus on what type of regime should replace the existing one became increasingly difficult. Indeed, as we will see, once the ancien régime began to crumble, a vicious cycle developed, as long-repressed social, political, and economic divisions and grievances led to mass mobilization which, combined with a lack of legitimate national-level institutions capable of responding to them, led to growing disorder and eventually violence.⁴¹

The vicious cycle is illustrated by the fate of the Estates-General. The Estates-General had been called to deal with two significant but limited tasks: remedying the fiscal situation and reforming absolutism. However, the nature of the ancien régime made it difficult, if not impossible, to limit reform to the financial and political realms. When the Estates-General last met in 1614 it was organized around the traditional semi-feudal, tripartite division of society, but by the end of the eighteenth century this organization was obsolete. As a result, almost as soon as the Estates-General was called, conflicts broke out about what form it should take and what procedures it should follow.

Particularly problematic was representation. Traditionally, each of the three orders had equal weight in the Estates-General, ensuring that the privileged orders could always outvote the third estate. Given the social, economic, and ideological changes that had occurred since 1614, the third estate was unwilling to accept structural subservience: “equality” for emerging Third Estate leaders “was the overriding moral and legal” goal.⁴² (This was a good reflection, as one revolutionary leader put it, of how a “revolution in ideas” preceded the “revolution in fact.”⁴³) In the period after its calling, innumerable pamphlets appeared demanding a new voting system in the Estates-General that would “correctly” reflect the nature of contemporary

society. The most famous of these was Abbé Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès's *What Is the Third Estate?*, which famously declared:

What is the third estate? Everything.

What has it been heretofore in the political order? Nothing.

What does it demand? To become something therein.

Sieyès demanded that the privileged orders grant the third estate political power commensurate with its social and economic import—if they did not, they should be abolished.

Debates about representation soon superseded fiscal reform as the main source of controversy. As noted above, many of the privileged had expressed a willingness to give up at least some privileges in return for political reform in the 1787 Assembly of Notables—the assumption, of course, being that political reform would work to their benefit.⁴⁴ The demands of the third estate for increased political representation threatened this assumption. In May, the nobility and clergy rejected the third estate's voting plan (the nobility voting 188 to 46 against and the clergy 133 to 114), as did the crown. In response, the third estate walked out⁴⁵ and reconstituted itself as the Commons (*Communes*), declaring that as the elected representatives of 95 percent of the nation they had both the right and the duty to take control of its affairs. In June the third estate went further, pronouncing itself the *National* Assembly—the title itself rejecting the particularism and privilege that lay at the heart of the ancien régime—and asserting its right to reform France. With this what had begun as a revolt by the privileged against absolutism had become something different. Power and initiative had passed from the privileged to the third estate, and the agenda had expanded from financial and political reform to a broader questioning of the ancien régime.

Furious, the king closed the hall where the National Assembly met. When the deputies arrived on June 20 and found the doors locked and guarded by soldiers, they moved to a nearby tennis court where they took an oath (the “Tennis court oath”) to continue meeting until France had a new constitution. In response, Louis XVI made another of the vacillating moves that over time aggravated even those sympathetic to him, asserting his authority and then backing down under pressure. In this case the king announced that he would accept reforms but not the separation of the orders; accordingly, he demanded that the Assembly disburse and re-assemble as Estates. The third estate rejected this and its supporters rioted. Faced with the third estate's refusal and growing social disorder, the king conceded and on June 27 declared that remaining members of the first two estates should join the third in the National Assembly. But rather than stopping the revolution, continued mass

mobilization combined with critical miscalculations on the part of the crown sent events spiraling further out of control.

This is exemplified by the storming of the Bastille. On July 11, 1789, Louis XVI, under pressure from conservative advisers, decided again to dismiss his popular finance minister Jacques Necker, who had been called back in 1788. Parisians interpreted Necker's firing and the growing concentration of royal troops in key areas as the beginning of a conservative counter-reaction and rioting broke out. On July 14 crowds descended on the Bastille, which stood in the center of Paris as a potent symbol of royal authority (although by this point it was almost devoid of prisoners). By the end of the day the Bastille had fallen and the head of its Governor, de Launey, was on a pike. This caused the king to back down again: he promised to disburse his troops, recall Necker, and return to Paris from Versailles.⁴⁶

After the fall of the Bastille, mass mobilization continued, not only in Paris but also in the countryside, helping to push the revolution further from its initial fiscal and political goals into social and economic transformation. The peasantry was by far the nation's largest social group, and its mobilization shifted the revolution's momentum and trajectory. Particularly important were the peasant rebellions that broke out in the summer of 1789 known as the "Great Fear." These rebellions had their roots in the peasantry's anger at the nobility's and Church's domination of land ownership, right to tithes, and various other feudal obligations, but these long-standing resentments were aggravated by the intense suffering caused by the agrarian crisis that hit France in the late 1780s. The combination of long-standing resentments, short-term suffering, and disintegrating national political authority created the perfect conditions for an explosion.

In order to appease the peasants, the National Assembly moved beyond fiscal and political issues to social and economic ones. The Assembly's "August Decrees" abolished the privileges of the first and second estates as well as those enjoyed by many French provinces; feudal obligations, tithes, the sale of offices, and corporate-based judicial and taxation regimes were now gone. As François Furet put it, "A juridical and social order, forged over centuries, composed of a hierarchy of separate orders, corps and communities, defined by privileges somehow evaporated, leaving in its place a social world conceived in a new way as a collection of free and equal individuals subject to the universal authority of the law."⁴⁷ The "August Decrees" were followed by other changes. The first was the adoption of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen on August 26. Reflecting the influence of Enlightenment ideals, the Declaration's first article proclaimed: "Men are born equal and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may be founded only

upon the general good.” Whereas in the ancien régime “rights” were the result of birth or membership in a particular group, rights were now declared to be something to which all citizens were entitled.⁴⁸ The Declaration then enumerated as “natural, unalienable and sacred” a range of classic liberal rights including equality before the law, the sanctity of property, and freedom of speech and the press. In addition to renouncing the privileges and status hierarchies at the heart of the ancien régime, the Declaration also repudiated its notions of sovereignty, asserting that “sovereignty resides in the nation. No body nor individual may exercise any authority which does not proceed directly from the nation.” With this, Louis XVI ceased being a divine right monarch and became instead “King of the French” (*roi des Français*), whose authority emanated *from* the people and whose rule was to occur in accordance with law.

In November the National Assembly further undermined the foundations of the ancien régime by declaring the property of the Church (and later of the Crown and noble émigrés) “national property” (*Biens nationaux*). Church land was sold in small lots, which appealed to peasants. The great French historian Jules Michelet argued that the nationalization of Church lands helped “put the seal . . . on the wedding of the peasant and the revolution.”⁴⁹ In addition, Church property was used to back a financial instrument called *Assignats*, which were used to pay down the national debt. A political benefit of these moves was that anyone who purchased *Assignats* or nationalized lands more generally developed a “material stake in the revolution.”⁵⁰

As a result of these changes, by the end of 1789 France had been radically transformed from even a year earlier: sovereignty had been transferred from the crown to the nation, and the three Estates had been abolished along with the larger system of privilege they represented. Reflecting this, people were already referring to the “old regime” as that which existed before the constitution of the National Assembly.⁵¹ With much of the institutional infrastructure of the “old regime” gone, focus turned to constructing a “new regime” to take its place. And while there had been broad consensus, at least within the third estate, on desirability of getting rid of the old regime, there was not much agreement on what should replace it. In particular, by the end of 1789, conflicts within the third estate and the “reform coalition” more generally over whether to stick with the original, somewhat limited aims of the National Assembly—eliminating absolutism and the social and economic privileges that went along with it—or to push France’s transformation even further came to the fore. Over the coming months these conflicts deepened as a result of social disorder, the threat of foreign intervention, and several decisions taken by the National Assembly.

One was its passing of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy in July 1790. Given the close connection between the Church and the *ancien régime*, any attempt to transform the latter inevitably involved changes to the former.⁵² The process of reforming Church-State relations had already gone quite far since the clergy's privileges had been eliminated and the Church's property had been nationalized. However, the Civil Constitution went a fateful step further, turning bishops and priests into officials paid by the state, rather than ecclesiastical appointees, and demanding that they swear an oath of loyalty to the new regime. Despite widespread resentment of the Church's wealth, privileges, and support for the *ancien régime*, many found this unacceptable. The lower-level clergy, for example, who had generally been sympathetic to the third estate and reforming the *ancien régime*, split, with approximately half refusing to take the new oath and some continuing their parish duties even though this was now technically illegal. This measure also divided the third estate, with the generally religious peasantry particularly resenting this move.

Another critical event was the king's attempt in June 1791 to flee with his family to Austria (the queen's birthplace) to foment counter-revolution. Like so many of the king's moves, this was poorly implemented and counter-productive. The royal family was recognized on their journey, arrested in Varennes, and returned to Paris under guard where they were confined to the Tuileries palace. The "flight to Varennes" (as it became known) embittered both the crown's detractors and supporters. For the former, it confirmed the king's untrustworthiness and unwillingness to reconcile with the revolution; calls for a transition to a republic and even for putting the king on trial for treason grew louder. The latter, meanwhile, along with foreign monarchs, were infuriated by the treatment meted out to the royal family and the growth of republicanism and radicalism. In July Emperor Leopold II of the Holy Roman Empire and Frederick William II of Prussia issued the Declaration of Pillnitz, which stated that Louis XVI's fate was of concern to all European monarchs and threatened intervention if he was further harmed.

Against a backdrop of heightened domestic and international tension the National Assembly presented its draft constitution in 1791. It was fairly moderate,⁵³ calling for a constitutional monarchy, with a king subservient to the rule of law and balanced by a powerful legislative branch. Indeed, under this constitution the legislative branch would dominate since it had the right to initiate and enact legislation, ultimate say over declarations of war and treaty making, and control over taxation and public expenditures. The king, on the other hand, was granted a "suspensive veto," which would enable him to delay but not fully block legislation. In

addition, the 1791 constitution called for a reorganization of the French state, eliminating the privileges of many provinces and creating a new system of departments (*Départements*) under the national state. Also notable was the constitution's enshrining of liberal values by making the Declaration of the Rights of Man its preamble.

The 1791 constitution would, in short, have created a constitutional France. The problem was that by this point the constituency for moderation had shrunk dramatically. Reactionaries, émigrés, and foreign monarchs believed that things had gone too far and that the time for counter-revolution was at hand. Others, meanwhile, believed that things had not gone far enough, and wanted to move the revolution in a republican or democratic direction.⁵⁴ To deal with the former, in November 1791 the National Assembly declared that all French citizens who had fled abroad would be considered potential counter-revolutionaries; any who did not return and thereby prove their loyalty to the new regime would be guilty of a capital offense. Later that month the Assembly declared that priests who refused to take an oath of loyalty would be considered politically suspect and therefore at risk of losing their pensions as well as subject to official surveillance and perhaps even exile. After some vacillation, Louis XVI vetoed both decrees, further convincing many that he was in cahoots with émigrés and foreign powers.

Particularly important during this time was the republican *Girondist* faction (sometimes called the *Brissotins* after Jacques Pierre Brissot, a leading member of the movement and head of the legislative Assembly), which favored a pre-emptive attack on France's enemies. In March 1792 the king gave in to Brissot and others and filled his cabinet with "a team of outright warmongers"; a month later he declared war on Austria to a "delirious" Assembly.⁵⁵ Soon after, the Duke of Brunswick, commander of the Prussian and Austrian forces, issued the Brunswick Manifesto, threatening the French with revenge if the king or royal family were harmed. Given the fear of foreign invasion and the already high level of suspicion against the king, the manifesto was interpreted as further proof of the king's secret collaboration with foreign forces. (And indeed the manifesto had been sent to him in advance for approval.) On August 10 a mob stormed the Tuileries Palace, killed the Swiss Guards, and arrested Louis XVI and the rest of the royal family. A wave of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary violence now threatened to overwhelm France. In addition to advancing foreign armies, royalist revolts broke out in a number of French provinces, and in Paris a complete lack of authority combined with growing fear of counter-revolution led to more mob violence (the "September massacres") against those viewed as "enemies of the revolution."

More changes followed. By the end of September a republic was declared; a few months after that a decision was made to put Louis XVI on trial. This turned out to be a show rather than a real trial. Maximillien Robespierre, for example, who would play an increasingly important role in the revolution, made clear his view that a trial was unnecessary since “Louis has already been judged. He has been condemned, or else the Republic is not blameless.”⁵⁶ And so in January 1793 Louis XVI was condemned and executed, physically eliminating the most important remaining connection to the *ancien régime*.

Although perhaps apocryphal, the quote often attributed to Louis XIV, “L’État, c’est moi,” was true in one important sense—the king had been at the center of an interconnected web of political, social, and economic institutions and relationships; with him gone, what was left of these collapsed.⁵⁷ With the country in chaos—the 1791 constitution was moot since it was based on constitutional monarchy and the monarchy was now gone—and foreign armies threatening France, the situation spiraled further out of control.

In order to protect France from its internal and external enemies, a “Committee on Public Safety” was set up by the National Convention in the spring of 1793.⁵⁸ In the summer of 1793 the committee put forward another constitution. Whereas the 1791 constitution had called for a constitutional monarchy, the 1793 constitution (sometimes referred to as the Constitution of the Year I or the Montagnard Constitution⁵⁹) laid out the framework for a transition to democracy. Like its 1791 predecessor, the 1793 constitution was based on the Declaration of the Rights of Man but went beyond it, calling for universal manhood suffrage, an end to slavery, a right to subsistence, public education, and rebellion against unjust governments. This would have given France a more democratic order than existed in the United States at the time. In keeping with its democratic spirit, the constitution was presented to the public in a referendum and approved by an overwhelming majority.

France’s first democratic experiment was extremely short-lived. Threatened by enemies within and without, the convention delayed the constitution’s implementation and turned dictatorial powers over to the Committee on Public Safety. Within the committee power passed to the radical Jacobin faction and from there to Robespierre, who moved mercilessly against all perceived enemies. The moderate Girondists were pushed out of power; many were eventually put on trial and some executed. Similar ruthlessness was displayed towards other “enemies of the revolution”: thousands were sent to the guillotine and revolts in various parts of the country were brutally suppressed; the most significant of these, the royalist uprising in the Vendée, was crushed in a bloody campaign that claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands.⁶⁰ And these numbers, as terrible as they are, do not fully capture the horrors of this

time: hundreds of thousands were accused of political crimes and subject to mock trials, and friends and neighbors spied on and denounced each other. Terror became an instrument of state policy. Robespierre argued, “Terror is only justice: prompt, severe and inflexible; it is then an emanation of virtue; it is less a distinct principle than a natural consequence of the general principle of democracy, applied to the most pressing wants of the country.”⁶¹ Alongside attempting to eliminate all perceived enemies and vestiges of the ancien régime, the committee also tried to create a “new nation” and a “new man” to replace them, undertaking a unprecedented campaign of social engineering that included imposing a new calendar, concretely symbolizing the dawning of a new epoch in human history; instituting a new system of weights and measures that would eventually become the metric system; replacing traditional holidays with ones celebrating revolutionary values like virtue and labor; trying to eradicate patois and homogenize and systematize the French language; and attempting to eliminate remaining vestiges of Catholicism and make a “cult of reason” or “Cult of the Supreme Being” the new state religion instead.

Against its external enemies, the committee was ruthless. The most important innovation during this time was the *levée en masse*, essentially, the mobilization of the entire nation or mass conscription, which translated the democratic politics of the revolution into the military realm. Whereas under the ancien régime, most people were excluded from political, social, and economic power and wars fought by professional armies with minimal attention to public attitudes and needs, now France belonged to the nation and defense was accordingly the responsibility of all. And so in order to deal with a desperate situation—the country was at war with Austria, Prussia, Spain, Britain, and other European powers—the National Convention declared in August 1793 that

From this moment until such time as its enemies shall have been driven from the soil of the Republic, all Frenchmen are in permanent requisition for the services of the armies. The young men shall fight; the married men shall forge arms and transport provisions; the women shall make tents and clothes and shall serve in the hospitals; the children shall turn old lint into linen; the old men shall betake themselves to the public squares in order to arouse the courage of the warriors and preach hatred of kings and the unity of the Republic.

The effect was momentous. The number of men in the army increased dramatically, reaching a peak of perhaps 1,500,000, and other citizens were put to work in support roles and war industries. Remarkably, the combination

of larger armies infused with revolutionary patriotism helped turn the tide against foreign invaders.

Because of the contrast between the democratic and egalitarian aspirations that ushered in the First French Republic and the horrors perpetrated during it, scholars have long debated why a transition from democracy to the Reign of Terror occurred. Some view it as an inevitable consequence of the unrestrained rise of mass politics and the idealistic, and perhaps unrealistic, desire to put in place a political order based on abstract notions of the “common good” or “collective purpose.”⁶² Others view it as a response to the outbreak of war and the threat of foreign invasion⁶³: in such a situation a dictatorship willing to employ all means necessary to defend France was required. Others argue that in assessing the “Reign of Terror” “one has to keep in mind the repressive aspects of the social order to which it was a response”.⁶⁴ in this view, the roots of the *ancien régime* were so deep and its defenders so intractable that extreme means were necessary to eradicate them. There is surely something to all these views: revolutionaries were indeed seized by a belief that a new order had dawned and that any and all means might be necessary to protect it from those eager to restore the old one. In addition, the threat of war and invasion created desperate challenges and widespread fear—a combination that often leads to extreme measures. And finally, there is no doubt that the *ancien régime*’s social, economic, and political roots were so deep and its legacies so vast that any new regime would face immense challenges eradicating or overcoming them. Perhaps, therefore, the best way to understand the transition from democracy to dictatorship in France during this time is by combining insights from all these perspectives: faced with an existential threat from invading armies and the almost complete breakdown of domestic order that followed the collapse of the political, social, and economic institutions of the *ancien régime*, many of the country’s leaders and citizens concluded that a ruthless dictatorship was the only way of saving the revolution from its external and internal enemies. R.R. Palmer, for example, in his classic study of the Reign of Terror described the situation thus:

Paris was in turmoil. Street orators and demagogues, secret agents both of the government and of its enemies, radicals and counter-revolutionaries of every description roamed the streets. Deserters from the army, disguised priests and strange foreigners jostled with half-crazed patriots and self-appointed saviors of the nation. On the frontiers the armies of England, Holland, Spain, Prussia and Austria were thrusting themselves into France. The ports were practically closed by the British navy. Beyond the battle lines lay a Europe

unanimously hostile, stirred up by French émigrés, by conservatives of all nationalities almost hysterical with fear, by the pope and the Catholic hierarchy, and by Catherine the Great of Russia, an old woman near death who urged on the Allies while declining to join them.

Anarchy within, invasion from without. A country cracking from outside pressure, disintegrating from internal strain. Revolution at its height. War. Inflation. Hunger. Fear. Hate. Sabotage. Fantastic hopes. Boundless idealism. And the horrible knowledge, for the men in power, that if they failed they would die as criminals, murderers of their king. And the dread that all gains of the Revolution would be lost. And the faith that if they won they would bring Liberty, Equality and Fraternity into the world.⁶⁵

But by the middle of 1794 fear of the fanatical Robespierre and a widespread desire for an end to ever-escalating violence helped turn the tide again. In July the convention ordered the arrest and then quick execution of Robespierre, ushering in another regime change. During the following period, known as the Thermidorian reaction,⁶⁶ French armies held off their adversaries and the Reign of Terror ended. The new regime could not, however, stabilize the country and violence continued, but was now directed against Jacobins and others on the “left” rather than counter-revolutionaries on the right. The Thermidorian regime also drew up another constitution, which eliminated many of the progressive and democratic reforms of the 1793 constitution. The 1795 constitution, sometimes referred to as the Constitution of the Year III, called for a republic with limited suffrage and indirect elections, a bicameral legislature with an upper house to “check” the lower, and a five-man directory as its executive.

This satisfied neither the right nor the left, and these divisions, sharpened by years of violence, made stability and compromise difficult. In October 1795 a royalist attack on the convention was put down with the help of a young upstart general named Napoleon Bonaparte who then bolted to fame and increasingly important military posts. The convention handed off power to the directory, which was increasingly reliant upon military force and the prestige and lucre it gained from military victories abroad to stay in power. (After many years of war and domestic upheaval, France’s economy was in almost complete shambles and the state’s budget had become dependent on revenue extorted from foreign territories.) In short, despite ostensibly coming to power to correct the excesses of Bourbon absolutism and the Reign of Terror, the directory’s own unpopularity combined with continued domestic instability led it to abandon legal and constitutional methods and

rely on force.⁶⁷ In September 1797 this was taken a step further when, after an election that returned gains for the right, three members of the directory mounted a coup and annulled the elections. This triumvirate then assumed emergency powers and began purging purported royalists from governmental and judicial posts as well as undertaking other punitive measures against alleged enemies. The triumvirate could not, however, gain significant popular support or deal with the country's myriad problems and deteriorating military situation, and so pressure for change continued. This time, however, the spark for yet another of the revolution's transitions was provided by a man who played a key role in its first one.

The Abbé Sieyès remained a crucial figure throughout the revolution, with his latest position being a director. Despite his leadership in it, Sieyès was convinced the directory could not deal with France's problems and began plotting its end. Sieyès fixated on Napoleon as the man to implement his coup, due to the popularity the latter had gained as a result of his military adventures. What Sieyès did not recognize was that Napoleon was not interested in playing second fiddle. On November 9, 1799 (18 Brumaire VII on the revolutionary calendar), deputies were told that a Jacobin plot was underway and that they needed to leave the center of Paris. By the next day, however, they realized this was a coup rather than a Jacobin rebellion. Now facing resistance, Napoleon marched into the chambers and chased out the opposition; from this point forward he, rather than Sieyès, was in charge.⁶⁸

Playing on France's exhaustion and widespread desire for order, another constitution was drawn up—the constitution of the Year VIII/December 13, 1799—establishing a new regime called the Consulate. This latest transition was critical: just as France had provided Europe with its first modern democratic experiment and perhaps its first totalitarian one as well, it now pioneered yet another new and totally modern type of political regime—the populist dictatorship—that would finally bring some stability to France for the first time in over a decade. The 1799 constitution mixed democratic and dictatorial elements in novel ways. It paid lip service to universal suffrage and popular sovereignty, but centered power in the executive branch, particularly in the hands of the First Consul (Napoleon). Voting was popular, but indirect, with voters electing “notables” who then served in various governing bodies. The new constitution was submitted to a plebiscite and approved by the extraordinary vote of 3,000,000 in favor and 1,500 against. Plebiscites became Napoleon's favored way of invoking popular legitimacy—allowing him to claim support for his initiatives without having to deal with institutions that might constrain him or regular interventions in his governing. In 1802 and 1804 he again used plebiscites to expand his authority,

becoming “First Consul for Life” and then emperor.⁶⁹ Napoleon’s coronation was full of symbolism (and immortalized in the famous painting by Jacques-Louis David, *The Coronation of Napoleon* [*Le Sacre de Napoléon*]). Most famously, he crowned both himself and the queen, making clear his independence from the Church (normally the pope would place the crown on the king’s head) and that his power derived from the “unanimous will of the French people and Army.”⁷⁰ In addition, his oath went as follows:

I swear to maintain the integrity of the territory of the Republic, to respect and enforce the Concordat and freedom of religion, equality of rights, political and civil liberty, the irrevocability of the sale of national lands; not to raise any tax except in virtue of the law . . . and to govern in the sole interest, happiness and glory of the French people.⁷¹

Although the idea of a republican emperor seems like an oxymoron, Napoleon’s empire was more popular and more successful than any of the post-revolutionary regimes preceding it. To be sure, Napoleon’s military genius had much to do with this: his accomplishments in this sphere were of truly historic proportions, bringing France power and glory it would never again achieve. Napoleon’s military accomplishments fed his reputation, enhanced his charisma, and provided him with a level of domestic support that previous regimes did not have. But although Napoleon’s military accomplishments were extraordinary, his domestic accomplishments were remarkable as well.

These accomplishments cannot be understood separate from the man; in many ways, Napoleon embodied the spirit of the revolution. He viewed himself as a supporter of the Enlightenment, opposed to the obscurantism and traditionalism of the ancien régime and was determined to shape his country’s destiny.⁷² In addition, he was committed to many of the revolution’s goals and was a product of it: Napoleon’s military position was a consequence of the emigration of much of the noble officer corps during the early stages of the revolution and the subsequent emergence of leaders based on talent rather than birth. Napoleon had, in short, the will and desire to continue transforming France as well as the qualities that enabled him to gain the support necessary to do so. Napoleon can thus be seen as the last of the enlightened dictators of the early modern period as well as the first thoroughly modern one, since he both sought and achieved a remarkable degree of popular legitimacy. Reflecting this, Tocqueville characterized his regime as “the despotism of a single person resting on a democratic basis.”⁷³ This combination of authority *and* popular support⁷⁴ eluded all previous post-1789 regimes and explains why Napoleon was able to achieve what the others

had not: during his rule the coups, rebellions, food shortages, inflation, and overall lack of order that had plagued France for a decade ended, and the long and arduous process of consolidating the revolution's achievements began. Never one for modesty, when once asked what his impact had been on the revolution Napoleon responded, "I finished it."⁷⁵

It is perhaps not surprising that Napoleon's most notable domestic accomplishments were in the realm of state-building, since it was precisely flaws or contradictions in the ancien régime state that set off the chain reaction that led to his rise to power. In essence, Napoleon continued the process of state centralization and modernization that began under the ancien régime.⁷⁶ During the Napoleonic period the venality, clientelism, and privilege that pervaded the ancien régime state were eliminated and the foundations of a professional bureaucracy and administration put in place. These reforms enabled Napoleon to achieve goals that the ancien régime could not. For example, societal-wide tax collection began, which, along with the development of the Bank of France, gave France a degree of financial stability the ancien régime did not have. In addition, under Napoleon the state could enforce its will over France's entire territory. Key here was the Napoleonic code. Reflecting his outsized ambition and energy, Napoleon provided France, and subsequently many parts of Europe, with its first uniform legal code that enshrined equality before the law for all men (but not women and children); eliminated the welter of corporate and provincial privileges that had previously divided France; proclaimed freedom of religion; institutionalized property rights; and mandated equal property inheritance for all sons. The Napoleonic code permanently eliminated, in short, the legal underpinnings of the privileges that lay at the heart of the ancien régime. Napoleon once wrote, "My motto has always been: a career open to all talents"⁷⁷—something his own life, of course, exemplified. Napoleon opposed privilege, distinctions based on birth, and other socioeconomic features of the ancien régime, and during his regime wealth or service rather than birth began determining social status and power. A concrete way in which Napoleon tried to cultivate this shift was through the Legion of Honor, the first modern order of merit and a replacement for the chivalrous orders that had existed under the ancien régime: the new "aristocracy" would be based on wealth and state service rather than birth or privilege.

Another key accomplishment of the Napoleonic period was in the realm of Church-State relations. Although the ancien régime had limited the independence and political power of the Church, the two remained inextricably intertwined, and the latter's social power and economic resources were largely left in place. The revolutionaries concluded that in order to eliminate the ancien

régime, it was necessary to eliminate Catholicism. With the Concordat signed with Pope Pius VII in July 1801 Napoleon confirmed the revolution's undermining of Church power, but backtracked on its extreme secularism.⁷⁸ The Concordat institutionalized the state's dominance over the Church, but allowed religion to be practiced freely. In addition, Catholicism became the "religion of the great majority of the French," but not the official state religion. Moreover, religious freedom was written into the Napoleonic code, and Protestants and Jews were promised the right to practice their religion. Also important was the Concordat's official acknowledgment of many other revolutionary changes, including the clergy's position as state employees, their need to swear an oath of allegiance to the state, and the irrevocable nationalization of church lands.

In addition to his accomplishments in France, Napoleon spread many of the ideas and institutions of the revolution across Europe. Indeed, the French revolutionary armies saw themselves not as "conquerors, but as liberators, at the service of a universal ideal of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Their mission was to free subject peoples from tyranny, aristocracy, and fanaticism."⁷⁹ In the lands of his empire Napoleon abolished feudalism, privilege, and serfdom; put in place new tax structures and fiscal systems; imposed state control over religion; instituted the Napoleonic Code and proclaimed equality before the law; standardized weights and measures; modernized state bureaucracies; and more. In short, not only did Napoleon reorganize the map of Europe—coming closer to integrating Europe into a single empire than at any time since Rome—he also reorganized the countries he conquered. By the "close of the Napoleonic era in 1815 there was hardly a country west of Russia and Turkey and north of the Pyrenees . . . that had not been profoundly affected" by the expansion or imitation of the French Revolution.⁸⁰

Even after Napoleon's military overreach caused his regime to collapse and monarchies to be restored in France and elsewhere in 1814/15, there was no going back to the status quo ante. Many of the administrative, fiscal, and juridical reforms instituted under Napoleon's empire were maintained by restoration monarchs—who had learned from Napoleon how powerful a modern state could be.⁸¹ In addition, the experience of war and occupation transformed much of Europe in ways no restoration could roll back. Mass conscription created armies motivated not merely by paychecks but by patriotism that had marched across the continent, changing forever the way wars were fought and experienced. In addition, occupation by foreign armies and rule by foreign leaders who proclaimed universal rights and freedom of the people but denied the conquered self-government and violently suppressed opposition helped spur nationalism across Europe. This was particularly

true in Germany and Italy, the territories of which were not just conquered but also reorganized and consolidated. We will see the consequences of these developments in chapters 5, 7, and 8. That the post-Napoleonic restoration of Europe re-organized the continent's borders without much concern for the wishes of the people involved inflamed nationalism further. And finally, the overthrow, however temporary, of the *ancien régime* in many places broke traditional habits of loyalty and showed that such a thing could be done. The long-term effects were momentous:

It was now known that revolution in a single country could be a European phenomenon, that its doctrines could spread across frontiers, and what was worse, its crusading armies could blow away the political system of a continent. It was now known that social revolution was possible, that nations existed as something independent of states, peoples as something independent of their rulers, and even that the poor existed as something independent of the ruling classes.⁸²

In short, the French Revolution and its Napoleonic aftermath began what would turn out to be a long and arduous struggle to eliminate the *ancien régime* and replace it with a new one.

Conclusions

Understanding the outbreak and development of the French Revolution requires two things: understanding why the *ancien régime* was unable to deal with the challenges it faced and thus collapsed, and understanding why this collapse led not just to a political transition but to social and economic revolution as well.

The chapter began with Tocqueville's insight that "without a clear idea of the old regime . . . it is impossible to comprehend" either the French Revolution "or the history of the . . . years following its fall."⁸³ As we saw in chapter 2, the early modern period was an interregnum, a sort of half-way house between the pre-modern and modern eras. During this period French monarchs began constructing a modern state, but left many pre-modern social and economic relationships and institutions intact. By the mid- to late eighteenth century this schizophrenic mix of modern and pre-modern elements, combined with changing social, demographic, economic, and ideational conditions, made it difficult for the *ancien régime* to respond successfully to the challenges confronting it. The clearest and most consequential example of this was in the financial realm.

By the 1780s the ancien régime state's flaws had caused growing financial problems, which combined with an economic downturn to create a crisis. Solving this crisis would require renegotiating the system of privilege that lay at the heart of the ancien régime, thereby bringing the crown into conflict with groups upon whose support it depended. French kings therefore tried to avoid this for as long as possible, but by the late 1780s this was no longer possible.

The nature of the ancien régime combined with changing social, demographic, economic, and ideational conditions thus explains why it could not deal with the challenges it faced and thus collapsed. The chaotic revolution that followed this collapse was also shaped by the ancien régime's nature. Dependent on a complex and deeply entrenched system of privileges, French monarchs found it ideologically and politically difficult to reform. When finally forced to reform, the interconnectedness of political, social, and economic spheres in the ancien régime made limiting change to any one of them difficult, especially once mass mobilization was added to the mix. And since the ancien régime did not allow any authoritative national political institutions to develop, French citizens had little experience organizing politically, compromising, or working across social boundaries.⁸⁴ When a national assembly, the Estates-General, finally did meet in 1789, France was already in the midst of crisis and it quickly collapsed into internal bickering over basic questions regarding form and procedure, rendering it unable to deal with the rising discontent in French society.

In addition to a lack of national-level institutions, another legacy of the French ancien régime was an extremely divided country. Not only was French society split into "closed, self-regarding groups" which had little "trace of any feeling for the" common good,⁸⁵ French provinces had very different administrative, legal, and cultural traditions. In 1789, in other words, various groups shared little beyond discontent with the reigning order. Long-standing societal and territorial divisions, moreover, had been aggravated by demographic, economic, and ideological trends as well as a deep economic crisis in the 1780s. And, later on, fears of émigré-inspired counter-revolution and foreign invasion were layered on to this toxic mix. As a result, once the ancien régime collapsed, France descended into a political vacuum and—without national political institutions, traditions, or norms to guide or respond to it—discontent and divisions that had long been brewing under the surface exploded. Indeed, as the contrast with 1848 makes clear (see chapter 5), a key feature of the French Revolution was the extent and duration of this "explosion": the entire "third estate"—the vast majority of the population—became involved, including, most critically, the peasantry,

whose continued mobilization propelled the revolution past political reform and into more radical social and economic transformations.⁸⁶

The contrasts between the English *ancien régime* discussed in the previous chapter and its French counterpart are telling. In the former, aspiring absolutist monarchs were unable to eliminate the national Parliament, enabling it to act as a “coordinating mechanism” or focal point for political opposition, activity, and organization during and after England’s tumultuous seventeenth century. In addition, the existence of a national parliament gave opponents of absolutism an “alternative” governance system to rally around, that is, a “balanced” or constitutional monarchy. Furthermore, in addition to absolutism never taking hold in England, neither privilege nor particularism were entrenched in the *ancien régime* English state as deeply as they were in the French; also critical is that England did not have a mass reservoir of discontented peasants to propel violence and disorder forward. These factors help explain why the Glorious Revolution was less violent and chaotic than the French Revolution and remained largely limited to the political realm, rather than spiraling into the massive social and economic revolution that occurred in France between 1789 and 1815.

Alongside understanding the outbreak and development of the French Revolution we also need to understand its consequences. Whether the revolution was the most “glorious” event in European history or “a total disaster” is a debate that has been carried on by historians since the revolution began.⁸⁷ Clearly, there is something to both perspectives. The revolution performed the “salutary” task of freeing the modern world, as one historian put it, “from its medieval fetters,”⁸⁸ but the violence it took to accomplish this left France scarred and divided, hindering its ability to consolidate many of the revolution’s gains or achieve political stabilization more generally.

Beginning with the “positive” side of the ledger, the revolution eliminated absolutism and much of the rest of the political and legal infrastructure of the *ancien régime*. Although the Bourbons were restored after Napoleon’s fall, their rule (see chapter 5) was very different from that of their predecessors: constitutions, separate legislative and executive branches, and an electoral system were all now parts of the political system, and the “nation—composed of citizens stripped of corporate distinctions and officially equal before the law—replaced hereditary, divinely sanctioned monarchy” as the source of sovereignty.⁸⁹ In addition, popular participation was a genie that could not be put back in the bottle. Even though France’s first democratic experiment came to a quick, ignominious end, from this point forward neither rulers nor conservatives could ignore popular opinion. Also immense was the revolution’s effects on the French state and nation. As a

result of the revolution, a “modern” state emerged in France. Although the ancien régime appeared strong and powerful to contemporaries, it could not fully or directly control its people, territory, or the Church. After 1815 social and territorial privileges were gone; nationwide systems of law, taxation, and customs were in place; the bureaucracy, administration, and military were professionalized; the corporate and intermediary structures that had stood between people and the government were eliminated; and the Church was made subservient to secular authority. The post-revolution state, moreover, was now the tool of the people or the nation rather than the monarch, enabling its power to be applied more effectively and ruthlessly than ever before.⁹⁰

Before 1789, France was a crazy-quilt of overlapping and incompatible units, some fiscal, some judicial, some administrative, some economic, and some religious. After 1789, those segments were melted down into a single substance: the French nation. With its patriotic festivals, its tricolor flag, its hymns, its martyrs, its army, and its wars, the Revolution accomplished what had been impossible for Louis XIV and his successors: it united the disparate elements of the kingdom into a nation and conquered the rest of Europe. In so doing, the Revolution unleashed a new force, nationalism, which would mobilize millions and topple governments for the next two hundred years.⁹¹

There is a great historical irony here: although a key goal of absolutism was centralizing power, as the English and even more the French case shows, it was only with absolutism’s demise that truly modern nation-states emerged.⁹²

In addition to eliminating absolutism and much of the rest of political and legal infrastructure of the ancien régime, the revolution transformed France’s society and economy.⁹³ Post-revolutionary society was no longer composed of corporate groups but of individual citizens, equal before the law. The big loser in this transition was the nobility. As we saw in chapter 2, it had lost most of its political power with the rise of absolutism. The revolution now robbed it of its social and economic privileges as well: its monopoly of high offices in the state, church, and military; feudal dues and services; much of its land; and its special fiscal and legal rights.⁹⁴ If the nobility was the revolution’s main loser, the revolution’s main beneficiary was probably the middle class or bourgeoisie. Careers became open to talent, or at least wealth, rather than being reserved for those from a particular group or background, and critical legal and institutional barriers to the emergence of capitalism were removed: guilds, monopolies, and communal lands were eliminated; the rule of law strengthened; and the right to property institutionalized.⁹⁵

Besides the middle class or bourgeoisie, the revolution's other main beneficiary was probably the peasantry, which also got much of what it wanted, namely an end to feudal rights and ecclesiastical tithes, and most importantly, control of their land.

Alongside these positive or “progressive” consequences, the revolution had negative ones as well. The chaos and violence of the revolution crushed the French economy and made dealing with fiscal and economic problems carried over from the *ancien régime* difficult. Historians estimate that French GNP in 1799 was only about 60 percent of what it had been in 1789.⁹⁶ Over the longer term, the revolution's economic impact was mixed. As noted above, the revolution swept away many legal and institutional barriers to the emergence of capitalism, but many of its other consequences were less beneficial. For example, selling off noble and Church lands may have reinforced a preference among the wealthy to invest in land rather in business, commerce, or industry. Probably more important was the revolution's establishment of a class of small and middle peasant proprietors fervently tied to their land, which slowed urbanization, the expansion of the domestic market, and economic modernization overall.⁹⁷

Like its economic record, the revolution's political and social impact was mixed. Most obviously, the modern world's first democratic experiment failed, leading to chaos, terror, and an eventual transition back to dictatorship, first of the military populist and then eventually of the monarchical variety. The revolution also left behind a society scarred by social divisions and violence. Pre-revolutionary French society was also deeply divided, but by the end of the Napoleonic era the country had suffered through over twenty-five years of warfare, economic decline, coups, and civil conflict, layering new social fault lines and fears on top of the old. Two groups in particular emerged from the revolutionary years dissatisfied with the status quo. Royalists, nobles, and other conservatives resented the changes wrought by the revolution and were determined to reverse many of them. The working class, democrats, and radicals, meanwhile, were frustrated that some of the revolution's changes had been reversed and were determined to push France in a more democratic and egalitarian direction.

Although the revolution, in short, destroyed the foundations of the old order, the process of building up a new one had just begun. However, the deep social divisions and resentments left over by the revolution, as well as a tradition of social revolt if not upheaval, made achieving a consensus on what this new order should be extremely difficult. In retrospect it is clear that the French Revolution was not the end, but rather the beginning of the end of an era.