

IX. The French Revolution and the Birth of Modern Europe (1789-1848)

A. Europe's Two Great Stories

1. From the fall of Rome in 476 to the French Revolution of 1789, European civilization was in its *medieval* period.
2. The Reformation helped bring about the end of this civilization, because it split the Christians of different nations against each other, but it did not affect Europeans' understanding of government. The power of the kings and lords to rule their people continued until 1789, when the French Revolution finally set Europe upon a new path, and the story of *modern Europe* began.
3. If the European Union succeeds, we may indeed be on the cusp of a third great story—the story of supranationalism—but it is too early to tell.

B. The Absolute Corruption of Absolute Monarchy

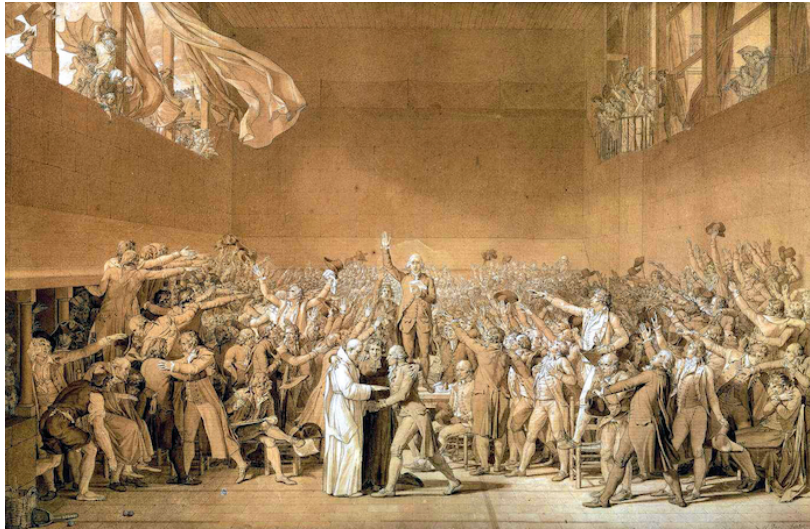
1. Louis XIV had spent great sums of money on wars, including the War of the Grand Alliance (1689-1697) and the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-1713).
2. As a result of these wars, Louis XV inherited a debt of 2.5 Billion Francs (2,500,000,000 Francs!).
3. Louis XV then led France into the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-1748) and the Seven Years' War (1756-1763), which cost more money, and through which France lost its colonies in America.
4. When Louis XVI became king, he tried to get revenge on England by allying with the United States in the American Revolution. The debt became 6.5 Billion Francs!
5. To pay for its wars, France – like every other nation – taxed its people. In France, however, there was no tradition of resisting the king's power like that of England. (There was no French Magna Carta or parliament.)
6. To make matters worse, the king sold the right to collect taxes to “tax farmers,” who were free to try to take as much money from the people as they could get away with.
7. The privileged lords and Church paid virtually no taxes.
8. Perhaps the most infamous act of Louis XV was to organize the “Compact of Famine” – a monopoly to buy all the grain in the country – and then withhold it from the people until they were so desperate that they would buy it back at “famine prices.”

C. The Estates-General of 1789

1. To obtain help in solving the problem of the debt and taxes, Louis XVI called the “Estates-General,” the nearest thing to a Parliament in France.
2. The Estates-General was composed of three parts, with representatives from:
 - a) the Church (the First Estate)
 - b) the lords (the Second Estate)
 - c) the common people (the Third Estate)
3. The Estates-General had not been called by the king since 1614 (175 years)!
4. When it was called by the king, its representatives were expected to meet in three separate groups and discuss the problems presented to them by the king.
5. If two out of three groups agreed on a complaint or a recommendation then it was passed on to the king.
6. This was a major problem for the Third Estate, because its decisions could be overturned by the other two. In order to gain more power, the Third Estate refused to meet separately. This sparked a crisis that began the French Revolution.

D. The Oath of the Tennis Court (1789)

1. In defiance of the king, the Third Estate proclaimed itself to be the “National Assembly,” representing the people of France, and declared all previous taxes illegal.
2. The king tried to lock the National Assembly out of its meeting hall, but its members simply met in the king’s indoor tennis court instead. There they took the “*Oath of the Tennis Court*,” promising to stay at Versailles until they had created a new constitution for France.



The Oath of the Tennis Court, by Jacques-Louis David depicts the key moment where the leading commoners of France declared their intention of creating a government of the people.

E. The Violent End of Medieval Life in France

1. The king now felt insecure, and ordered troops into the region around Paris and Versailles.
2. The people of Paris, fearing the use of force against them, stormed the Bastille, a fortress and prison in Paris, to obtain weapons, and killed some of the soldiers there. (This violent event, July 14th, 1789, is now celebrated as France’s national holiday.)
3. On August 26th, 1789, the National Assembly created the “Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen.” One of its main ideas was: “Men are born and remain free and equal in rights...”
4. Unlike the American Declaration of Independence, however, the French declaration did not say that individual rights are “inalienable” (which means can never be taken away). Instead the French declaration that limits to rights could be set by laws, and that the law was “an expression of the general will.” Since the “general will” amounts to what most people, or, the majority, want, this is the basic formula for a *democratic government*. A government that defines rights socially (by means of democracy) is called “democratic socialism.”
5. As the new government was creating a constitution, Louis XVI tried to escape from France with his family. They were discovered, however, and dragged back to Paris.
6. Amazingly, the Constitution of 1791 maintained the monarchy. It was a *constitutional* monarchy, where the king could participate in the government, along with a “legislative assembly.”

7. However, because of the rough treatment of Louis XVI, the Austrian Emperor and King of Prussia issued the Pillnitz Declaration in 1791 warning the French people not to harm the king, or they would attack.
9. In response to this threat, the new government of France took the initiative and declared war on Austria in early 1792.
10. The leaders of the Revolution no longer wanted a compromise. They chose to create a “republic,” by which they meant only *a government with a constitution, but no king*. (This is not a full and proper definition of a republic, and it shows, sadly, that the French “republicans” did not really understand what a republic is.
11. Fearing that foreign kings would always try to help the king, and that he would conspire to return to power, the revolutionary leaders now decided to get rid of the king once and for all. He was “guillotined” on January 31st, 1793.