

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 caused the break-up of Christianity, but it did not affect the power of the kings and lords to rule their people. This only changed starting in 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. 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.
3. Louis XVI then helped the United States in the American Revolution.
4. 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.)
5. 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.
6. Every trick possible was used to get money, and yet the Church and the lords paid almost no taxes.

C. The Estates-General of 1789

1. To try to solve 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)
6. The representatives were expected to meet in three separate groups and discuss the problems presented to them by the king.
7. If two out of three groups agreed to a recommendation then it was passed on to the king.
8. 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 that way.
9. The king tried to lock the National Assembly out of its meeting hall, but its members met in the king's



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.

indoor tennis court and took the “*Oath of the Tennis Court*,” promising to stay at Versailles until they had created a new government for France.

D. 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 says that limits to rights can be set by laws, and that the law is “an expression of the general will.” This is the meaning of “democratic socialism.”
5. As the new government was being created, Louis XVI tried to escape from France with his family. They were discovered, however, and dragged back to Paris.
6. 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.
7. In response to this threat, the new government of France took the initiative and declared war against its enemies.
8. The leaders of the Revolution now chose to create a “republic,” by which they meant only *a government without a king*.
9. Fearing that foreign kings would always try to help the French king 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.