

G. The French Revolution (1789-99) and the Birth of Modern Europe

1. The *Reformation and Religious Wars* brought an end to the idea of religious unity for Europe, after which all that remained of Europe as a cultural block was a collection of kingdoms in various stages of nationalization (i.e. of forming into distinct *nations*).
2. The story of Europe after 1648 was thus dominated by the countries that were the furthest along the path of becoming nations under the leadership of a strong king, of which the strongest, after Spain exhausted itself fighting the religious wars, was France.
3. Indeed, France was the first country whose monarchy became “absolute,” and whose absolute power produced absolute corruption and a rebellion against kingly power. The symbol of this kingly power was the palace of Versailles, the greatest symbol of monarchical power in history, built for Louis XIV. The building of this palace began to process of bankrupting the monarchy, which was exacerbated by spending of huge wars, including the Seven Years’ War (in which France lost control of North America to Britain) and the American Revolutionary War (in which France helped America in order to get revenge on Britain).



This aerial view of the palace of Versailles helps us appreciate the power of the French monarchy. The chateau has 2300 rooms!

4. When the people has been taxed to their limit, at the end of this sequence of great spending projects, king Louis XVI was forced to ask for help to solve his financial difficulties in 1789, by calling an assembly of representatives of the people known as the “Estates-General.” The commoners of this assembly refused to be shut out of a meaningful contribution by the aristocracy and the Church, who were the other two groups represented, and they took the dramatic step of convening their own unofficial assembly in the king’s indoor tennis court and swearing an oath to created a new set of laws (a *constitution*) for France.

5. When the king summoned the army for his protection, the people of nearby Paris viewed this as a sign that he was going to suppress the assembly of representatives, and their hope for change would be dashed. Having lived under absolute monarchy too long, they were not willing to submit to this fate, and a huge crowd stormed *the Bastille*, a prison in the center of Paris, to seize its weapons and free the prisoners. When the people felt compelled to violence as by this event on the 14th of July (France’s national holiday to this day) the chance for compromise was lost, and a *revolution* was truly under way.



This sketch of the *Oath of the Tennis Court* by Jacques-Louis David captures the pivotal moment where the French Revolution became about the “will of the people.”

6. The violence of the uprising of the commoners against their oppressive monarchy was compounded by an invasion of France by its neighboring monarchies when its kings decided that they needed to uphold the principles of monarchy in order to avoid being the victims of a revolution themselves.
7. The combined effect of a war and of civil violence produced a very chaotic and dangerous situation. Those most committed to revolution—the “radicals”—feared that their aims would be frustrated, if they didn’t resort to the most brutal tactics possible. They created the “Committee of Public Safety,” and executed the king using the guillotine! The committee’s leader was a man named Robespierre, and as long as he was in charge, France suffered a “Reign of Terror”. Anyone who criticized Robespierre was executed. It went on for months, until Robespierre himself was arrested and executed in 1794, just as he had done to so many others.
8. After the death of Robespierre, the surviving moderates created a government known as the Directory, with five directors at the head. But Robespierre's death had created a vacuum of power. The Revolution seemed to have no great leaders left. Many people now wished for the return of the monarchy. Supporters of monarchy and of the Directory clashed in the streets of Paris, and a monarchist attack on the Directory was stopped by an officer named Napoleon Bonaparte, whose army units fired on the monarchists to protect the revolution. Napoleon Bonaparte would soon be known simply as “Napoleon.”
9. After a string of military successes Napoleon created a government known as the Consulate. (It was led by three “consuls,” a title once used by officials in the ancient Roman Republic. Napoleon was “first consul.”) After yet another victory in Italy, he was made “First Consul for Life,” but he evidently had his sights set on something more.
10. In 1804, having defeated France’s main enemies repeatedly, Napoleon was able to crown himself “Emperor of the French.” For the time being, the Revolution had failed. It had merely produced a new kind of monarchy. As we know from our earlier studies, however, Napoleon was eventually defeated, and the ideas of the revolution lived on.

H. The Rise of Socialism

1. On August 26th, 1789, the representatives of the commoners, calling themselves 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..."
2. 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.”
3. As the Industrial Revolution got underway in Europe in the decades after Napoleon, the key application of the social theory of rights became the idea that the government should defend a new view of rights, defined as the “right to work.” The originators of this notion were the first *socialists* in the realm of economics.