

## 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 with the strongest monarchies, especially France.
3. 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.
4. When the people has been taxed to their limit by Louis XIV, and then by his heirs Louis XV and Louis XVI, the monarchy became bankrupt.
5. The commoners refused to pay more taxes, and decided to try to force new laws on the king in 1789.
6. 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.
7. The violence of the uprising of the commoners against their oppressive monarchy was made worse 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.
8. Those most committed to revolution in France—the “radicals”—feared that their goal of overthrowing the monarchy 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, just as he had done to so many others.



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



This sketch of the *Oath of the Tennis Court* by Jacques-Louis David captures the moment when the French people first rejected monarchy and tried to create a new government.

9. After the death of Robespierre, the remaining leaders of the revolution formed a new 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, who soon was known simply as "Napoleon."
10. 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.
11. 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.