

William Doyle

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

A Very Short Introduction

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Contents

	List of illustrations	ix
1	Echoes	1
2	Why it happened	19
3	How it happened	37
4	What it ended	65
5	What it started	81
6	Where it stands	98
	Timeline: Important dates of the French Revolution	109
	The Revolutionary Calendar	116
	Further reading	119
	Index	125

Chapter 1

Echoes

'Mr Worthing,' says Lady Bracknell in *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), 'I feel somewhat bewildered by what you have just told me. To be born, or at any rate bred, in a handbag, whether it had handles or not, seems to me to display a contempt for the ordinary decencies of life that reminds one of the worst excesses of the French Revolution. And I presume you know what that unfortunate movement led to?'

Presumably Mr Worthing did. Every person of good general knowledge in the nineteenth century knew something about the great upheaval which had marked the last years of the eighteenth. Serious Victorians would have felt it a duty to instruct themselves about what had happened in France, and why, in and after 1789; and how the ensuing turmoil had been brought to an end only by the generation-long 'Great War' against Napoleon which had marked the lives of their parents or grandparents. Mr Worthing, nibbling his cucumber sandwiches and dreaming of marrying Lady Bracknell's daughter, would not have been so curious. But probably even he would have had some idea of what the worst excesses of the French Revolution had been, and of how they had affronted life's ordinary decencies. He would have known that there had been a popular uprising leading to mob rule, the overthrow of monarchy and persecution of the nobility. He would have known that the chosen instrument of revolutionary vengeance was the guillotine, that relentless mechanical decapitator which made the streets of Paris

run with royal and aristocratic blood. The creator of Mr Ernest Worthing and Lady Bracknell (her ancestors, had they been French, could scarcely have hoped to avoid the dread instrument . . .) ended his days in morose exile in Paris. There, Oscar Wilde was surrounded by symbols and images deliberately designed by the rulers of the Third Republic to evoke the memory of the First, the Revolution's creation. The coinage and public buildings were emblazoned with the slogan *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*. On festive occasions the streets fluttered with red, white, and blue bunting, the colours of the tricolour flag adopted by the French Nation in 1789. On 14th July each year a national festival celebrated the fall on that day in 1789 of the Bastille, a forbidding state prison stormed and then levelled by the people in the name of liberty. At such moments of public jubilation French patriots sang the *Marseillaise*, the battle hymn of a war against tyranny launched in 1792. And undoubtedly the greatest sight in Paris when Wilde lived there was the world's tallest building, the Eiffel Tower, the centrepiece of a great exhibition which had marked the Revolution's first centenary in 1889.

Nobody who lived in France, or visited it, could avoid these echoes; or echoes of Napoleon, who had marched under the tricolour, had tamed and harnessed the energies unleashed by the Revolution, and whose nephew Napoleon III had ruled for 22 years before the Third Republic was established. Nobody who knew anything of France even at second hand (if only through learning what was still the first foreign language of choice throughout most of the world) could fail to imbibe some sense that this country had been marked by a traumatic convulsion only just beyond living memory. Many believed, or felt, that this must have been for the best and somehow necessary. Everybody knew and was shocked by the story of how Queen Marie-Antoinette, guillotined amid popular jubilation in 1793, had said 'Let them eat cake' when told that the people had no bread. (Everybody knows it still, and nobody cares that it was an old story even before she was born, heard by Jean-Jacques Rousseau as early as 1740.) New nations have been proud to proclaim their emancipation, or to anticipate it like the patriots of Brussels in

1789, or Milan in 1796, by adopting tricolour flags. This banner of liberty still flies from Rome to Mexico City, from Bucharest to Dublin. Poles, who first sang the *Marseillaise* in 1794 as they resisted the carve-up of their country, sang it again in 1956 in revolt against Soviet tyranny. In 1989, as France commemorated the Revolution's 200th anniversary, the same anthem of defiance was heard in Beijing, among the doomed student protesters in Tiananmen Square. Few countries have failed to experience some sort of revolution since 1789, and in all of them there have been people looking back to what happened in France then and subsequently for inspiration, models, patterns, or warnings.

Cross-Channel perspectives

Most detached from all this have been the world's English-speaking countries. Their last revolutions, except in Ireland, took place before 1789, and even English-speaking contemporaries who sympathized with the French saw them as catching up with liberties proclaimed in England in 1688, or America in 1776. In any case such sympathizers were always in a minority. The mould for most English-speaking attitudes was cast as early as 1790, some years before the Revolution's 'worst excesses', by Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Outraged at the claims of reformers that the French were merely carrying on the work of the 'Glorious' British revolution of 1688 and the American rebels whose cause he had supported in the 1770s, Burke asserted that the French Revolution was something entirely new and different. Earlier revolutions in the anglophone world had sought to preserve a heritage of liberty from attack. By the new French standards, indeed, they had not been revolutions at all; for the French were seeking to establish what they called liberty by wholesale destruction. With caution, and respect for the wisdom of their ancestors, they might have corrected the few and venial faults of their former institutions, and come to run their affairs as freely and peaceably as the British ran theirs. But they had chosen to follow the untried dreams of rationalizing, self-styled 'philosophers' who had sapped faith in monarchy, the social order, and God Himself.

The result had been anarchy and the envious rule of the 'swinish multitude'. Burke predicted worse to come, and foretold that it would take a military dictatorship to end it all. Even he did not foresee how bloody matters would become, but he was right about the eventual triumph of a general. Burke came, therefore, to be revered as a prophet as well as a critic; even if the superiority of the British over the French way of doing things seemed only to be fully vindicated 18 years after his death, on the field of Waterloo.

But the French were incorrigible, and in 1830 the tricolour was unfurled again over a new, though briefer, Parisian revolution. Why had it come back to haunt the future? As the generation that had made or experienced the original cataclysm died away, historians began to appropriate it for analysis. Most of them are now forgotten, and the one who is not commands little respect among later practitioners of his craft. But Thomas Carlyle did more than anyone else to fix the popular idea of what the French Revolution was like. In his wild, inimitable style, *The French Revolution. A History* (1837) painted a vision of mindless and vengeful chaos. He did not follow Burke in trying to defend the ancien régime, the order that the revolutionaries destroyed. He thought it was rotten, and deserved its fate. While courtiers minced, and windbags prated, the hungry masses brooded on their oppression: 'unspeakable confusion is everywhere weltering within, and through so many cracks in the surface sulphur-smoke is issuing.' The Revolution was an explosion of popular violence, understandable if scarcely defensible resentment. Those who attempted to lead or guide it were mostly simpletons or scoundrels, all to be pitied for their presumption. The most frightful figure of all was Robespierre, who tried to rule through terror, and who was now fixed forever in non-French minds as the 'sea-green incorruptible' (in reference to his complexion as well as to his power). He sent his victims to their fate, and finally followed them there himself in tumbrils (a half-forgotten word for a tipping cart, never afterwards used except in this context). 'Red Nightcaps howl dire approval' as the tumbrils pass: this means sansculottes, men who did

not wear aristocratic kneebreeches but flaunted their patriotism with red caps of liberty. They and their screaming womenfolk were driven on by visceral lust for social revenge. Carlyle only recognized three men as capable of directing these forces of nature. One was Mirabeau, whose death in 1791 left his promise unfulfilled. Another was Danton, who saved France with his energy from foreign invasion in 1792, but was engulfed two years later by the terror: 'with all his dross he was a Man; fiery-real, from the great fire-bosom of Nature herself.' (At the time of Carlyle's writing, Georg Büchner was presenting German speakers with *Dantons Tod* [*Danton's Death*, 1835], a play in which Danton is depicted as too heroic a figure for the petty beings like Robespierre who combined to kill him.) Finally there was Napoleon, who brought the army into politics in 1795, ending the last Parisian insurrection with a 'whiff of grapeshot'.

Dramatic depictions

The idiosyncratic vigour of Carlyle's writing leaves an impression of years of ceaseless turmoil, with blood and violence, merciless 'sansculottism', and baying mobs a daily sight. It was irresistibly dramatic. But Carlyle also had an eye for the pathos of innocent victims falling prey to forces men could not control. Even Robespierre receives a twinge of sympathy as he rumbles towards the guillotine in his new, sky-blue coat. The book thrilled and appalled its readers, and it sold, as well as read, like a novel. Novelists themselves admired it, and none more so than Charles Dickens.

Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), in fact, offered by far the most influential image that posterity has of the French Revolution. From Burke it took one of its underlying themes - the contrast between turbulent, violent Paris and safe, tranquil, and prosperous London. But Dickens' most obvious guide and inspiration was Carlyle. From him comes the lurid picture of a cruel and oppressive old order, a world of 'rapacious licence and oppression', where harmless and innocent

victims can be confined by the whims of the powerful to years of imprisonment without trial in the grim and forbidding Bastille; where a nobleman can think the life of a child killed under the wheels of his coach can be paid for by a tossed gold coin. Worthless authorities rule over a wretched and poverty-stricken population aching with social resentment, in which Madame Defarge, impassively and implacably knitting, plans for the moment when revenge can be visited on her family's noble oppressors. The Revolution provides that moment: "The Bastille!" With a roar that sounded as if all the breath in France had been shaped into the detested word, the living sea rose, wave on wave, depth on depth, and overflowed the city to that point. Alarm bells ringing, drums beating, the sea raging and thundering on its own beach, the attack begun.' Madame Defarge helps to lead it: "What! We can kill as well as the men . . . !" And to her, with a shrill thirsty cry, trooping women variously armed, but all armed alike in hunger and revenge.' This turmoil goes on for years, but by 1792 the instrument of vengeance is the guillotine. Madame Defarge and her fellow Furies now knit around the scaffold, counting victims with their stitches. France is peopled with 'patriots in red caps and tricoloured cockades, armed with national muskets and sabres', sullen and suspicious, who instinctively curse all 'aristocrats'. 'That a man in good clothes should be going to prison, was no more remarkable than that a labourer in working clothes should be going to work.' By the beginning of 1794,

Every day, through the stony streets, the tumbrils now jolted heavily, filled with the condemned. Lovely girls, bright women, brown-haired, black-haired, and grey; youths, stalwart men and old; gentle born and peasant born, all red wine for La Guillotine, all daily brought into light from the dark cellars of the loathsome prisons, and carried to her through the streets to slake her devouring thirst. Liberty, equality, fraternity, or death – the last, much the easiest to bestow, O Guillotine!

And although the French aristocrat Charles Darnay escapes, and his persecutor Madame Defarge is killed before she can pursue him,

the book concludes with the English lawyer Sydney Carton sacrificing himself on the scaffold to her vengeance.

These images, intertwined with a powerfully crafted and heart-rending story, defined the French Revolution for Oscar Wilde's generation. For the next, and for the whole twentieth century, they were reinforced by the lesser talents of Mrs Montague Barstow, who dubiously capitalized on her birth in remote Hungary to call herself Baroness Orczy. *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1905) and its later sequels chronicled the adventures of a foppish English knight, Sir Percy Blakeney, who led a double life rescuing innocent aristocrats from the guillotine by spiriting them, in various disguises, across the Channel to safety. But gone were the nuances found in Dickens. While the people of Paris remained 'a surging, seething, murmuring crowd, of beings that are human only in name, for to the eye and ear they seem naught but savage creatures, animated by vile passions and by the lust of vengeance and of hate', their victims, 'those aristos . . . all of them, men, women and children who happened to be descendants of the great men who since the Crusades had made the glory of France' were objects of pity, and in no way responsible for the supposed oppression of their ancestors. The whole episode was pure blood lust, successfully defied only by the efforts of 'that demmed elusive Pimpernel' and his intrepid band of secret agents, all English gentlemen. There is little hint in Orczy, unlike Carlyle or Dickens, that the old order had earned the fate that had befallen it. There is simply regret for 'beautiful Paris, now rendered hideous by the wailing of the widows, and the cries of the fatherless children'.

The men all wore red caps – in various styles of cleanliness – but all with the tricolour cockade . . . their faces now invariably wore a look of sly distrust. Every man nowadays was a spy upon his fellows: the most innocent word uttered in jest might at any time be brought up as a proof of aristocratic tendencies, or of treachery against the people. Even the women went about with a curious look of fear and of hate lurking in their brown eyes, and all watched . . . and murmured . . . 'Sacrés aristos!'

Twentieth-century parallels

The Scarlet Pimpernel began as a successful play, and was regularly re-adapted for stage and screen throughout the twentieth century. So was *A Tale of Two Cities*. The scope offered by both for costume drama was too rich for producers to resist for long. But for twentieth-century audiences seeking to sample revolution there were now more immediate examples. The Bolshevik Revolution in Russia in 1917, chronicled at once in language that echoed Carlyle by John Reed in *Ten Days that Shook the World* (1919), offered a fresh paradigm. It was also captured by the new and more immediate medium of film. Even more abundantly, so were subsequent upheavals in Germany, China, and countless other countries experiencing revolution in the later twentieth century. Figures like Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, and Mao have replaced Robespierre or Danton as quintessential revolutionaries in the popular imagination. Even the unique horror of the guillotine has been dwarfed by the gas chambers of the Holocaust, the organized brutality of the gulag, the mass intimidation of Mao's cultural revolution, or the killing fields of Cambodia. And yet many Russians in 1917 saw themselves, and indeed were widely seen, as re-enacting the struggles in France after 1789. Subsequent revolutionaries, if less conscious of the French precedents, have nevertheless sought legitimacy in doctrines of popular sovereignty all traceable to claims first explicitly made in 1789. Many, even those like the Nazis who professed to despise traditions now especially revered by Communism, celebrated their power with rituals and ceremonies redolent of the great set-piece festivals organized first in France between 1790 and 1794.

The Corsican contribution

And one figure thrown up by the French Revolution has continued to be widely recognized – Napoleon. He remains one of the very few characters in history universally known by his first name, and by his appearance – especially if wearing his hat. He owes this recognition

largely to remarkable achievements as a general, but his military prowess was built on the opportunities afforded him by the Revolution, and when he created new regimes in the aftermath of his victories, he thought it self-evident that they should run themselves on principles elaborated in France since 1789. Certainly, the nineteenth century was haunted by the memory of the way that he and the revolutionized French nation tore the rest of Europe (Great Britain excepted) apart. The Russians particularly, although they (or at least their climate) defeated him, were traumatized by the invasion of 1812. Half a century later, Tolstoy made the struggle against Napoleon the setting for *War and Peace* (1865–9). The novel's characters, from Czar Alexander downwards, are at the same time impressed and repelled by the Corsican usurper and what he stands for. For good or ill, he transforms all their lives. All the inhabitants of continental Europe during Napoleon's lifetime could have claimed as much. Even when he had gone, many of them found their everyday existence still regulated by laws which he had introduced. Napoleon claimed, when his campaigning days were over, that his most enduring glory would not be that of the battles he had won, but his Civil Code. In reality, the Code was a revolutionary project which Napoleon merely brought to fruition. But its impact was substantial enough, and not only in France. A simple, clear, and uniform set of principles for the holding and transfer of property, it remained the basis of civil law in much of Germany throughout the nineteenth century, in Poland until 1946, in Belgium and Luxembourg until the present day. Its influence still pervades the legal systems of Italy, the Netherlands, and Germany. An even greater success story has been metrication. Elaborated between 1790 and 1799, the decimal metric system of weights and measures was zealously promoted under Napoleon. Even in France it was slow to establish its monopoly, but in the subsequent two centuries it has spread to most of the world. When the United States succumbs, as sooner or later it surely will, it will mark the most complete triumph of any of the many trends and movements that the French Revolution began, its fullest and least ambiguous living legacy.

DECLARATION OF THE RIGHTS OF MAN AND OF CITIZENS By the National Assembly of France

'THE Representatives of the people of France, formed into a National Assembly, considering that ignorance, neglect, or contempt of human rights, are the sole causes of public misfortunes and corruptions of Government, have resolved to set forth, in a solemn declaration, these natural, imprescriptible, and unalienable rights: that this declaration being constantly present to the minds of the members of the body social, they may be ever kept attentive to their rights and their duties: that the acts of the legislative and executive powers of Government, being capable of being every moment compared with the end of political institutions, may be more respected: and also, that the future claims of the citizens, being directed by simple and incontestible principles, may always tend to the maintenance of the Constitution, and the general happiness.

'For these reasons, the National Assembly doth recognize and declare, in the presence of the Supreme Being, and with the hope of his blessing and favour, the following sacred rights of men and of citizens:

I. Men are born, and always continue, free, and equal in respect of their rights. Civil distinctions, therefore, can be founded only on public utility.

II. The end of all political associations, is, the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man; and these rights are liberty, property, security, and resistance of oppression.

III. The nation is essentially the source of all sovereignty; nor can any individual, or any body of men, be entitled to any authority which is not expressly derived from it.

IV. Political Liberty consists in the power of doing whatever does not injure another. The exercise of the natural rights of every man, has no other limits than those which are necessary to secure to every other man the free exercise of the same rights; and these limits are determinable only by the law.

V. The law ought to prohibit only actions hurtful to society. What is not prohibited by the law, should not be hindered; nor should any one be compelled to that which the law does not require.

VI. The law is an expression of the will of the community. All citizens have a right to concur, either personally, or by their representatives, in its formation. It should be the same to all, whether it protects or punishes; and all being equal in its sight, are equally eligible to all honours, places, and employments, according to their different abilities, without any other distinction than that created by their virtues and talents.

VII. No man should be accused, arrested, or held in confinement, except in cases determined by the law, and according to the forms which it has prescribed. All who promote, solicit, execute, or cause to be executed, arbitrary orders, ought to be punished; and every citizen called upon, or apprehended by virtue of the law, ought immediately to obey, and renders himself culpable by resistance.

VIII. The law ought to impose no other penalties but such as are absolutely and evidently necessary: and no one ought to be punished, but in virtue of a law promulgated before the offence, and legally applied.

IX. Every man being presumed innocent till he has been convicted, whenever his detention becomes indispensable, all rigour to him, more than is necessary to secure his person, ought to be provided against by the law.

X. No man ought to be molested on account of his opinions, not even on account of his religious opinions, provided his avowal of them does not disturb the public order established by the law.

XI. The unrestrained communication of thoughts and opinions being one of the most precious rights of man, every citizen may speak, write, and publish freely, provided he is responsible for the abuse of this liberty in cases determined by law.

XII. A public force being necessary to give security to the rights of men and of citizens, that force is instituted for the benefit of the community, and not for the particular benefit of the persons with whom it is entrusted.

XIII. A common contribution being necessary for the support of the public force, and for defraying the other expences of government, it ought to be divided equally among the members of the community, according to their abilities.

XIV. Every citizen has a right, either by himself or his representative, to a free voice in determining the necessity of public

contributions, the appropriation of them, and their amount, mode of assessment, and duration.

XV. Every community has a right to demand of all its agents, an account of their conduct.

XVI. Every community in which a separation of powers and a security of rights is not provided for, wants a constitution.

XVII. The right to property being inviolable and sacred, no one ought to be deprived of it, except in cases of evident public necessity, legally ascertained, and on condition of a previous just indemnity.'

Thomas Paine's translation into English from the French incorporated in his great attack on Burke, *Rights of Man* (1791)

Human rights

'The Revolution was a grand thing!' exclaims Pierre Bezukhov in the first chapter of *War and Peace*. "... robbery, murder and regicide", ... interjected an ironical voice. "Those were extremes, no doubt, but they are not what is most important. What is important are the rights of man, emancipation from prejudices, and quality of citizenship." Certainly this was what the Revolution began with, and on 26 August 1789 the National Assembly promulgated a founding manifesto to guide its work: the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen. This was something entirely new in the history of the world. The English Bill of Rights of 1689 had only proclaimed the rights of Englishmen. The United States did not establish its own Bill of Rights until a year after the French; and whereas the French declaration was meant as a preamble

enshrining basic principles of a constitution, the American Bill was a series of afterthoughts, amendments to an already-existing constitution. Its principal architects, despite the precedent of declarations of rights prefacing a number of individual state constitutions in the 1770s, did not feel a properly drafted constitution was in need of what Alexander Hamilton, New York delegate to the Constitutional Convention, called ‘aphorisms . . . which would sound much better in a treatise of ethics than in a constitution of government’.

A declaration of human rights was a hostage to fortune: but that is precisely what the French citizens of 1789 intended. Since ‘ignorance, neglect, or contempt of human rights are the sole causes of public misfortunes and corruptions of Government’, a statement of the ‘natural, imprescriptible, and unalienable rights . . . constantly present to the minds of the members of the body social’ would ensure that ‘they may be ever kept attentive to their rights and their duties’. It would offer a yardstick against which all citizens could measure the behaviour of governments. Nor were these conceived of simply as French rights, although all French citizens were to enjoy them. Liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression; civil equality, the rule of law, freedom of conscience and expression; the sovereign authority of nations and the answerability of governments to the citizenry; all these were declared human rights, and by implication applicable everywhere. It is true that within six years the French had redrafted this list twice, extending it and then restricting it. Napoleon abandoned it entirely in his successive constitutions. But every subsequent constitution-maker has felt obliged to make a principled decision about whether or not to incorporate such a declaration; and all those who have done so have gone back at some point to the prototype of 1789. When in 1948 the fledgling United Nations decided to adopt a Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the preamble and 14 out of its 30 articles were taken in substance, and sometimes in very wording, from the Declaration of 1789. Two further articles derived from the more ambitious Declaration of 1793, and one from the more modest Declaration of Rights and

Duties of 1795. The European Convention on Human Rights, adopted in 1953, was also full of the provisions and language of 1789. And, whereas France itself declined to ratify the European Convention until 1973, by the time of the bicentenary of the Revolution in 1989, President François Mitterrand had ordained that it should be celebrated as the Revolution of the Rights of Man.

A disputed legacy

It was a vain hope. The British, as always, were determined to spoil France's party. Their royal family refused to attend any celebration of a regicide revolution. Margaret Thatcher declared that the rights of man were a British invention, and gave Mitterrand a lavishly bound copy of *A Tale of Two Cities*. A British historian working in America produced a vast chronicle of the Revolution which argued that its very essence was violence and slaughter (*Citizens*, by Simon Schama). It was a bestseller in a market where Burke, Carlyle, Dickens, and Orczy had clearly not laboured in vain. But even within France the celebrations proved bitterly contentious. Although when the Rights of Man were first proclaimed, the terror lay more than four years into the future, and the guillotine had not even been invented, few found it easy to look back on the Revolution as other than a single and consistent episode, for good or ill. For the left, the terror had been cruel necessity, made inevitable by the determination of the enemies of liberty and the rights of man to strangle them at birth. For the right, the Revolution had been violent from the start in its commitment to destroying respect and reverence for order and religion. Its logical culmination, some argued, was not merely terror, but, in the rebellious department of the Vendée, slaughter amounting to genocide. Many Catholic clergy, meanwhile, anathematized any celebration of what had brought the first attack in history on religious practice, using language that had scarcely changed in the course of two centuries. Mitterrand, however, enjoyed it all. The Revolution, he reflected with characteristic malice, 'is still feared, which inclines me rather to rejoice'.

A century, therefore, after thoughts of the French Revolution made Lady Bracknell shudder, people were still deeply divided about what 'that unfortunate movement' had led to. Everybody thought they knew, and few other historical episodes beyond living memory have remained capable of arousing such passionate admiration or loathing. That is because so many of the institutions, habits, attitudes, and reflexes of our own times can still be traced to what we think went wrong, or right, then. Greater knowledge of what occurred will not necessarily change anybody's mind. But it might offer a sounder basis for judgement than the random accumulation of snippets and snapshots which still satisfies most people's curiosity about this crossroads of modern history.

Chapter 2

Why it happened

We can scarcely discuss why anything happens until we have a basic idea of what it is. Almost any attempt to define the French Revolution too closely, however, will be tendentious, and exclude many of its complexities. Yet what it most certainly was not, was a single event. It was a *series* of developments, bewildering to most contemporaries, which stretched over a number of years. It was a sustained period of uncertainty, disorder, and conflict, reverberating far beyond the borders of France. It began between 1787 and 1789.

Financial overstretch

The crisis was triggered by King Louis XVI's attempts to avoid bankruptcy. Over the eighteenth century, France had fought three great wars on a worldwide scale. Accustomed by the pride, ambition, and achievements of Louis XIV (1643–1715) to regarding herself as the greatest European power, France found her pretensions challenged over the three generations following the great king's death by the rise of new powers – Russia, Prussia, and above all Great Britain. Rivalry with the British was fought out on the oceans of the world. At stake was dominance of the sources and supply of the tropical and oriental luxuries for which Europe was developing an insatiable appetite. Footholds in India, staging posts to China, fur-rich Canadian forests, tropical islands where sugar and coffee could be produced, access to

supplies of slaves to work them: these were the prizes for which the British and French fought almost uninterruptedly throughout the 1740s and 1750s. But France also had land frontiers and traditional continental interests to defend, and in the mid-century wars Louis XV (1715–74) found his forces overextended on both land and sea. In the Seven Years War (1756–63) the results were disastrous. Despite alliances with Russia and even the traditional enemy Austria, his armies were humiliated by the upstart Prussians. At sea, the British destroyed both the Atlantic and Mediterranean fleets, drove French power out of India and North America, and all but strangled the trade of the French Caribbean. At the peace of Paris (1763), France made no European gains and lost Canada and most of her establishments in India. Not only was the defeat comprehensive and shameful, the war also left the kingdom burdened with a colossal debt which there was little prospect of diminishing, much less paying off. Servicing it absorbed 60 per cent of tax revenues. And yet almost at once a fresh naval build-up began, and when in the 1770s the colonists of British North America declared their independence, France saw the opportunity for revenge on the tyrant of the seas. The prospect of destroying the British Empire, and the commercial rewards that would result, seemed well worth a renewed effort, and in 1778 Louis XVI went to war to protect the fledgling United States. This time it was a spectacular success. While continental Europe remained at peace, France led a coalition against the isolated British which broke their control of the Atlantic long enough to ship a French army to America. When British forces surrendered at Yorktown in 1781, the victory was more French than American.

But France made no territorial gains when peace was signed in 1783, and the independent Americans gave no sign of abandoning their traditional British trading links. And meanwhile the war had been paid for largely by new loans rather than significant increases in taxation. In financial terms it ended not a moment too soon; but massive borrowing now continued into peacetime. By 1786 a foreseeable decline in tax revenues

and the scheduled repayment of short-term war loans brought a financial crisis.

It was not that France lacked the resources to survive as a great power. Over the next generation the French would dominate the European continent more completely than they had ever done. It was rather that many of these resources were locked up by the system of government, the organization of society, and the culture of what revolutionaries would soon be calling the *ancien régime*, the old or former order. It took the Revolution to release them.

The *ancien régime*: government

In political terms pre-revolutionary France was an absolute monarchy. The king shared his power with nobody, and was answerable for its exercise to nobody but God. Affairs of state, including the finances, were his private domain; and in all things he was sovereign in the sense that his decisions were final. On the other hand, no king was, or sought to be, a completely free agent. Even Louis XIV was careful to take advice on all important decisions, and men born to be king (for queens regnant were prohibited by French law) were carefully taught that counsel was of the essence of their sovereign authority. Louis XVI believed this implicitly; but unlike his grandfather Louis XV (his own father had died before inheriting the throne) he did not invariably do what a majority of his ministers recommended. He particularly thought he understood finance – a fateful delusion as it proved.

Nor was the king unfettered in his choice of advisers. Although he could sack them without explanation, his practical choice was limited to career administrators, magistrates, and courtiers. They, in turn, could only be brought to his notice by the intrigues of other ministers and familiars of both sexes drawn from the ranks or clienteles of the few hundred families rich enough to live in the gilded splendour of the Court. Imprisoned in scarcely changing routines of etiquette established

in the previous century by Louis XIV, his two successors passed their lives peripatetically, following the hunting around forest palaces outside Paris – Fontainebleau, Compiègne, and of course Versailles, that spectacular seat of power imitated by rulers throughout Europe. When they visited the capital, it was briefly. Louis XIV had established this royal lifestyle deliberately to distance himself from a turbulent and volatile city whose people had defied royal authority during his minority in the uprising of the Fronde (1648–53). For their part, the Parisians remained suspicious and contemptuous of the Court. In 1789 many still remembered how, when celebrations in the capital to mark the future Louis XVI's marriage to the Austrian princess Marie-Antoinette in 1770 had led to a stampede in which 132 people were trampled to death, the festivities at Versailles had gone on regardless. Symbolizing the ill-starred alliance with the old enemy, the frivolous Marie-Antoinette never achieved popularity, even when, in 1781, she belatedly bore Louis XVI an heir. Her extravagance was so proverbial that even when rumours of it were disproved (as with her supposed secret purchase of a sumptuous diamond necklace in 1786) they were still believed. Unlike his raddled old grandfather, Louis XVI was a chaste family man who never took a mistress. But this threw the public spotlight onto his unpopular wife even more glaringly.

The king's absolute authority over the country at large was embodied in a handful of omniscient executive agents, the intendants. One of these was assigned to each of 36 generalities into which Louis XVI's kingdom was divided. The king thought them the showcase of his government, and there was no doubt about their high level of professionalism. But they were increasingly unpopular for their authoritarian ways, and their shortcomings and mistakes were mercilessly denounced by bodies whose authority they had largely supplanted since the seventeenth century. Taxation in some large provinces, for instance, still required the consent of estates – representative, though seldom elected, assemblies with no ultimate powers to resist, but whose semblance of independence enabled them

to borrow relatively cheaply on the king's behalf. Above all, the fiscal and administrative work of the intendants was constantly impeded by the courts of law, most of which had administrative as well as judicial functions. At the summit of the judicial hierarchy sat the 13 parlements, supreme or 'sovereign' courts of appeal where registration was required for all important royal legislation before it became operative. Before registering, the parlements had the power to send the king remonstrances pointing out flaws or drawbacks in the new laws. Increasingly over the eighteenth century, remonstrances were printed and published, exposing the principles of monarchical government to public debate in a country where overt political discussion was deemed none of the subject's business. In the end, the king could override such protests, but the procedure, which involved the monarch or his representative coming to a court in person and supervising the transcription of contested measures into the judicial registers, was laborious and spectacular. It underlined the magistrates' recalcitrance as much as the king's authority.

As in every aspect of the ancien régime, the judicial and institutional map of France had no uniformity. Some of the parlements presided over small enclaves, others over extensive provinces. The jurisdiction of the parlement of Paris covered a third of the kingdom. But all of the 1250 members of these courts owned the offices they occupied, as a result of the practice of venality. Since the sixteenth century kings had systematically sold public offices, along with hereditary tenure or free disposal, as a way of borrowing for little outlay. By the eighteenth century there were perhaps 70,000 venal offices stretching far beyond the judiciary, but the prestigious core of the system was the 3200-strong nobility of the robe, whose judicial offices conferred ennoblement. Most prestigious among them were the magistrates of the parlements, and because dismissing them would have entailed reimbursing the value of their offices, they enjoyed virtually unchallengeable tenure. The king could bully them by shows of force, but without the money to buy them out, he could not dispossess them.

Accordingly, throughout the eighteenth century they were able to keep up a growing volume of criticism and obstruction against the crown's religious and financial policies. Only in 1771 did Louis XV's ministers feel able to promise any compensation for suppressed offices, and then the parlements were ruthlessly remodelled and muzzled. An opportunity was created for unobstructed reform, but Maupeou, the chancellor responsible, had no serious reforming intentions, and no advantage was taken. Meanwhile his attack on the parlements, which had increasingly come to be seen as the voice of the king's unrepresented subjects, proved hugely unpopular. Anxious to begin his reign in an atmosphere of confidence and popularity, the young Louis XVI was persuaded to dismiss Maupeou and restore them.

In the short run it worked. Although some provincial parlements remained fractious, and obstructed their local intendant more than ever, the crucially important parlement of Paris proved fairly pliable for the best part of a dozen years. It was, however, at the cost of the king attempting nothing too radical. Innovation was seen, and accepted even by most ministers, as dangerous. 'Any system', declared the parlement in remonstrances of 1776 against the replacement of forced labour on the roads with a tax,

tending under the guise of humanity and benevolence to establish an equality of duties between men, and to destroy those distinctions necessary in a well-ordered monarchy, would soon lead to disorder . . . The result would be the overthrow of civil society, the harmony of which is maintained only by that hierarchy of powers, authorities, pre-eminences and distinctions which keeps each man in his place and keeps all Estates from confusion. This social order is not only essential to the practice of every sound government: it has its origin in divine law. The infinite and immutable wisdom in the plan of the universe established an unequal distribution of strength and character, necessarily resulting in inequality in the conditions of men within the civil order . . . These institutions were not formed by chance, and time cannot change them.

To abolish them, the whole French constitution would have to be overturned.

The ancien régime: society

Yet it was hard to see how a French king could keep up his international pretensions without some modification in his subjects' time-honoured privileges and inequalities. Nowhere was the kingdom's lack of uniformity more glaring than in the structure of privilege and exemption which gave each and every institution, group, or area a status not quite like any other. The kingdom had been built up over many centuries by a gradual and often haphazard process of conquest and dynastic accumulation, and successive kings had won the obedience of their new subjects more by confirming their distinct institutions than by imposing a preferred pattern of their own. Ever since the sixteenth century these confusions had been compounded by the practice of selling privileges and exemptions (usually but not always as part of the sale of offices) as a roundabout way of borrowing. In earlier times it was easier to do than trying to force the rich to pay taxes. The most powerful groups in society, in any case, had elaborated persuasive rationales for exemption. The clergy, a vast corporation drawing revenues from a tenth of the kingdom's land, and creaming off, in the form of tithes, a notional tenth of the yield of the rest, paid no direct taxes on the grounds that it performed its service to society by praying and interceding with God. The nobility, the social elite which owned over a quarter of the land, levied feudal dues over much of the rest, and steadily sucked most of the newly rich into its ranks via ennobling offices, resisted the payment of direct taxes as well. Nobles, the argument went, served the kingdom with their blood, by fighting to defend it. Many did (though as officers only), but many more never drew the swords they wore to demonstrate their status. In any case these ancient arguments failed to keep the nobility exempt from new direct taxes introduced in and after 1695. Nevertheless, in most provinces, nobles continued to escape the oldest basic direct tax, the

taille, not to mention forced labour on the roads. It was easy enough for rich commoners to buy themselves exemption as well, even if an ennobling office was beyond their means; simply moving to another town or province might be enough to secure real fiscal advantages. The burden of taxation, in other words, fell disproportionately on those least able to pay. To one extent or another, the rich were able to avoid it. It was the boast of the king's richest subject, his cousin the Duke d'Orléans, that he paid what he liked.

In real terms the total tax burden borne by the French had fallen over the eighteenth century. Yet whatever they paid they all considered themselves over-taxed. That was one reason why the resistance of the parlements, even though their magistrates were all nobles and represented nobody but themselves, was so popular. Even they recognized, however, that some emergencies necessitated higher taxes, and they acquiesced in a new levy of a twentieth on income from real estate in 1749. They even agreed to its doubling in 1756 and tripling in 1760. But the third twentieth lapsed when the Seven Years War ended, and meanwhile all sorts of provincial and institutional abatements had been negotiated, notably with the clergy and provinces retaining estates. Once assessments were established, the parlements always resisted their revision, even though this was an age of steady inflation. Their scepticism about the need for fiscal reform was only confirmed in the late 1770s when the American war was launched and sustained for four years without any substantial new taxation. This was the work of the Genevan banker Jacques Necker, who claimed to have achieved the incredible feat by 'economies' at the expense of courtiers and venal government financiers, two groups traditionally suspected of milking the public purse. But the purpose of such ostentatious savings was not to pay directly for the war, but to boost French credit in the international money market so as to sustain borrowing. Necker trumpeted his success in 1781 by publishing the first ever public statement of the royal accounts, the *Compte rendu au roi*. It showed the king's 'ordinary' accounts in modest surplus. It was what the public

wanted to hear, and few cared that the massive 'extraordinary' expenditure, covered by loans raised on the credit of the ordinary surplus, went unmentioned. The longer term consequence was to undermine all attempts by Necker's successors to improve the kingdom's tax yield, especially once the war was over. If all had been well in 1781, people later asked, what had gone wrong since, and who was responsible?

Necker had been brought in more as a credit consultant than as a minister. As a foreign-born Protestant, in fact, he was legally ineligible for public office in a kingdom where Protestantism had not been recognized since 1685. But he soon learned that he could not impose financial discipline on ministers without the regular direct access to the king which their office gave them. When he attempted to use his popularity to force the king to admit him to his innermost counsels, however, Necker was rebuffed, and resigned. The gesture was unprecedented: one did not resign on the king of France. Nor had previous ex-ministers behaved as Necker now did, continuing to publish on financial affairs and orchestrating public criticism of the policies of his successors. What this outsider to the habits of absolute monarchy had grasped was that, in political as much as in financial affairs, public opinion, or what governments took it to be, was of ever-increasing importance; and that without public confidence even, and perhaps especially, the most absolute ruler could achieve very little.

Public opinion

The constraints were obvious in innumerable ways. If, for instance, the whole financial history of the monarchy between 1720 and 1788 was a struggle to avoid bankruptcy, that was because renouncing debts, which earlier kings had done almost routinely, was no longer accepted as a legitimate option. Thousands had been ruined by a great financial crash in 1720, when another Protestant outsider, the Scotsman John Law, had attempted to liquidate the financial legacy of Louis XIV's wars

by absorbing the accumulated debt into the capital of a commercial 'Royal Bank'. The collapse of this experiment also produced an enduring mistrust of banks and paper money despite all they had done in Holland or Great Britain to sustain an unprecedented war effort against France. For subsequent generations, any expedient which stirred such painful memories was generally regarded as unthinkable.

Kings who renounced their debts, or paid them in precarious paper rather than clinking coinage, were seen as conjuring irresponsibly with their subjects' property, behaving arbitrarily; whereas in French legal tradition royal authority was expected to observe the law, proceed by advice, and respect the rights and privileges of those whom God had entrusted to its care and protection. In the eighteenth century these expectations were reinforced by the widespread conviction that since nature herself (as Isaac Newton had shown) worked by invariable laws and not divine caprice, human affairs should also be conducted so far as was possible according to fixed and regular principles, rooted in rationality, in which the scope for arbitrariness was reduced to a minimum. Anything else, when a single individual governed, was despotism; which the most influential political writer of the century, Montesquieu had taught his compatriots to regard as the worst of all governments, where no law protected the subject from the ruler's whims. So that when a series of draconian debt consolidations in 1770, which many saw as a partial bankruptcy, was followed by Maupeou's attack on the parlements, despotism appeared to have struck. Traditional intermediary buffers between ruler and subject had been swept aside. And despite Louis XVI's restoration of the old parlements upon his succession, instinctive confidence in the traditional constitutional structure could never be fully revived.

Yet although the public saw no need for either higher taxes or bankruptcy, only a government strong and confident enough to attempt either was likely to be able to carry other reforms that had widespread support. The judiciary, for example, was perceived to be

overstaffed, underemployed, and its procedures slow, expensive, and unreliable. A series of miscarriages of criminal justice exposed the cruelties and caprices of a system where magistrates were recruited by heredity or purchase rather than rational tests of competence. The labyrinthine complexities of the law, where attempts at codification had petered out in the 1670s, were sustained by innumerable local and provincial customs and privileges, many of them repeatedly confirmed in return for cash payments over the centuries. To reform any of this without compensating the losers would be widely seen as a breach of public faith, bankruptcy in disguise; but there was no prospect of ever finding the money to achieve it otherwise.

More thoughtful observers believed there were ways to square some circles. If economic productivity could be improved, fiscal benefits would be almost automatic. The Physiocrats or Economists (the first people to use this name) argued that all true wealth derived from agriculture, and that the land would produce more if natural laws were unimpeded by artificial human constraints. That implied tax reform – the abolition of burdensome charges like feudal dues in cash or kind, or tithes. It also meant commercial liberalization – the removal of controls on prices and free exchange, particularly in the grain trade. In comparison with agriculture, industry and commerce were held by these thinkers to be less important, and not generators of true wealth: but here too natural activity was impeded by over-regulation, the constraints imposed by trade guilds, and commercial monopolies. Administrators at every level found such reforming ideas increasingly attractive after mid-century; but as soon as they began to experiment with them they met with endless difficulties. Governments could not contemplate even the temporary loss of revenue, not to mention likely opposition from courts, estates, and various corporate bodies, which introducing a single tax would entail. Similarly with feudal dues: these were property rights, which could not be abolished equitably without compensation. A book advocating their suppression was publicly burned by order of the Paris parlement in 1776. As to the tithe, it was the

main source of income of the parish clergy. Where would a substitute come from? The merest hint of commercial and industrial deregulation, meanwhile, was vigorously opposed by well-organized lobbies of merchants, chambers of commerce, and guild masters. Only in 1786 was trade with overseas colonies made completely free and open, and an attempt to abolish the monopolies of Parisian trade guilds ten years earlier was abandoned after only a few months of chaos. The only people, in fact, who could be subjected to the full force of Physiocratic policies were those too weak to resist: the king's poorest subjects. They bore the brunt of experiments from the 1760s onwards to deregulate the grain trade. The idea was to let prices rise to a 'natural' level. High prices, so the theory went, would encourage growers to increase production, and the end result would be 'abundance'. In the short term, however, higher grain prices meant dearer bread, especially when harvests were poor. The first experiments with deregulation, between 1763 and 1775, coincided with a series of such shortfalls; and as magistrates and local authorities had warned from the start, public order broke down as prices shot up and markets were bare. When ministers made agreements with contractors to guarantee emergency supplies, they were accused of a 'famine pact' to starve the people. In the weeks before Louis XVI's coronation in May 1775, popular goodwill was squandered by renewed deregulation and severe repression of the 'flour war' grain riots which followed. And although Necker, sniffing popularity as always, kept the trade firmly under control, his successors resumed tinkering. When, in 1788, the harvest failed completely, free export in previous years had denuded the kingdom of stocks. And the confidence of ordinary people that the king would protect them from starvation had been completely eroded by a generation of economic experiments at their expense.

Nor did they any longer expect much comfort from God's servants in the Church. While there was plenty of respect for underpaid parish priests and the selfless nuns who staffed hospitals and poorhouses, there was widespread disgust at the grotesque maldistribution of the Church's

wealth, and the determination with which its richer beneficiaries defended their privileges. In mid-century the hierarchy had squandered much popular respect by zealous persecution of dissident priests who questioned authority in the Church in the name of Jansenism, an austere set of beliefs condemned as heretical by the papal bull *Unigenitus* of 1713. Jansenists were protected by sympathizers in the parlement of Paris, and in the 1740s and 1750s a series of lawsuits against priests refusing the last rites to dying Jansenists stirred up widespread fury against the hierarchy. When in 1757 Louis XV was (harmlessly) stabbed, his half-crazed assailant seemed to have acted out of vague sympathy for Jansenist tribulations. And Jansenism appeared to triumph in the 1760s when its oldest and most inveterate enemies, the Jesuits, found themselves involved in a case before the parlement. The magistrates used it as a pretext to expel them from the court's jurisdiction. Other parlements followed the lead, and a divided government acquiesced. The expulsion from the kingdom of a society which had educated most of the social elite for three centuries caused enormous educational upheaval. With the closure of their 106 colleges, something like a national curriculum was dissolved, and a generation of educational debate and experiment began. Almost at the same moment the establishment of a commission to review and consolidate failing monasteries suggested that even wider reform in the Church might be possible.

Educated critics had certainly been calling for it ever since the 1720s, when the scientific and humanistic development of the previous century began to crystallize into the utilitarian movement of criticism that came to be known as the Enlightenment. For the self-styled 'philosophers' who set out to popularize enlightened values, the established Church was the root of most of the evils in society. While the benevolent message of the Gospel was never disputed, clerics down the ages were deemed to have overlaid it with a mass of superstition and irrationality which they perpetuated through their influence in the state and control of the educational system. Happy to promote cruelty and intolerance,

they had amassed disproportionate riches to support the idleness of unproductive monks and spendthrift chapters and prelates. Even the social services provided by the Church, such as poor relief and hospital care, were irrationally funded and inefficiently organized. These charges were pressed home with innuendo and ridicule, for which the mid-century quarrels within the Church provided plenty of material. The Church's response was to call for ever more vigorous and vigilant censorship, while attempting to reduce its own vulnerability by internal reforms such as the action on redundant monasteries. But neither approach restored confidence in an institution whose basic inertia, inflexibility, and self-satisfaction had alienated sympathy, in different ways, at every level of society.

In one sense, the Church was a victim of its own success. Nothing had done more over the century than the efforts of dedicated clerical teachers to increase levels of literacy from around a fifth of the population to nearer a third. More readers produced a rising demand for printed materials of all kinds. Book production soared; so did that of more ephemeral material like chapbooks, legal briefs sold for public consumption, and newspapers. By Louis XVI's time, Paris had a daily paper and most provincial towns had weeklies. It is true that they were mainly advertising sheets, and when they printed news it was largely without comment. But serious interest in public affairs could be gratified by a flourishing French-language press published abroad; and the cost of regular reading could be spread by joining one of the rapidly proliferating literary or reading societies whose libraries subscribed to all the major periodicals. Another indication of expanding demand for the printed word was the growth in the number of government censors to whom all substantial writings for the public had to be submitted; and the increasing amount of time and energy devoted by customs officials to blocking imports of subversive pornographic, blasphemous, or, as it was increasingly called, 'philosophical' literature. After a period in mid-century when ministers despaired of stemming the flood, and turned a blind eye to most of it, under Louis XVI the government redoubled its

efforts to control what reached the reading public. But the market was too strong, and as much effort was soon being devoted to influencing what was reported and discussed as to preventing its appearance. Louis XIV had told his subjects what to do, and what to think. Under Louis XVI, it was recognized that they had to be persuaded.

The virtues of active cooperation between kings and their subjects had long been displayed across the Channel. Ever since the 1720s writers like Montesquieu and Voltaire had extolled the enabling freedoms of British liberty, toleration, and parliamentary government. British success in mid-century wars had shown that the system, still suspect to many for its dangerous volatility, was also formidably efficient. Some of the gloss was taken from the image of Great Britain when her colonies rebelled, and Anglomania was partially eclipsed by enthusiasm for all things American. But liberty and political representation were at the heart of the Anglo-American quarrel; and when Louis XVI allied with republican rebels who had proclaimed no taxation without representation, his subjects could scarcely help reflecting on why this principle was not deemed appropriate in France. In the handful of provinces with estates, of course, it was; but that made the situation elsewhere seem even more anomalous. As fiscal pressures increased, certain magistrates in the 1760s began to call for lost estates to be restored. When Maupeou attacked the parlements in 1771, some went further and called for a meeting of the nearest French equivalent to the British parliament, the medieval Estates-General, last convened in 1614. Others, with the comfortable ambiguities of absolute monarchy now exposed as empty, began to think of more rationally designed representative institutions that would visibly involve taxpayers in administration. Nor were ministers necessarily opposed to a principle which might sideline the parlements and their influence. Necker even began a programme of introducing 'provincial administrations', nominated assemblies of local landowners who would share the functions of intendants. Only two were established before his resignation, but they did not disappear with him. Slowly, hesitantly, with many misgivings but aware that

institutional paralysis was the only alternative, the monarchy was becoming less absolute under Louis XVI. The king and his ministers increasingly recognized that France must be governed with the effective consent and cooperation of the crown's most prominent and educated subjects.

The 'Pre-Revolution'

So the crisis of 1787 was not just financial. Calonne, the finance minister appointed in 1783 to manage a return to peacetime conditions, began with lavish expenditures in the hope of sustaining confidence. The borrowing which this required achieved just the reverse. As attempts to float new loans ran into increasing resistance in the Paris parlement, Calonne turned his thoughts to more radical solutions. On 20 August 1786 he presented the king with a comprehensive plan of reform, later described by the courtier bishop Talleyrand as 'more or less the result of all that good minds have been thinking for several years'. The king, after considering it carefully, accepted it with genuine enthusiasm.

The plan was threefold. First came fiscal reform, in the guise of a new, uniform land tax, with no exemptions, to be levied in kind. This, and other less important innovations, were to be overseen throughout the kingdom by provincial assemblies elected by all prominent landowners. Representative government was to be universalized – though not centralized in a national assembly. Secondly, the fiscal yield of the reforms was to be boosted by a programme of economic stimulation on Physiocratic lines: abolition of internal customs barriers, of forced labour on the roads, and of controls over the grain trade. In 1786, a commercial agreement with Great Britain had already opened French markets to British manufacturers in exchange for agricultural products. None of these measures, however, could be expected to yield immediate benefits. More borrowing would be required until the effects were felt. A major new boost in confidence was therefore required to

encourage lenders. Calonne hoped to achieve this by having his plans endorsed by a handpicked Assembly of Notables, people (as he put it) 'of weight, worthy of the public's confidence and such that their approbation would powerfully influence general opinion'. He considered convoking the Estates-General, but thought them likely to be uncontrollable. Instead he nominated 144 princes, prelates, noblemen, and magistrates, before whom he laid his proposals in February 1787.

It was a political disaster. Few of the Notables accepted Calonne's version of the crisis confronting the state. Even those who did tended to hold him responsible, and therefore not the right person to resolve it. An attempt by Calonne to appeal over his critics' heads to the wider public, by depicting them as mere selfish defenders of their own privileges, backfired; and the king was forced to dismiss him. An amended version of his plan was then brought forward by Brienne, an archbishop who had used the Notables as a ladder to power. It got nowhere when Louis XVI refused the Notables' proposal for a permanent commission of auditors to vet the royal accounts. By now, in fact, growing numbers in the assembly were declaring themselves incompetent to sanction reform of any sort. That, they declared, required nothing less than the Estates-General.

Experience with the Notables only made this seem more dangerous and unpredictable than ever, and on 25 May the assembly was dissolved. An attempt was now made to push the reforms through the parlements, but they too claimed incompetence. As crowds came onto the streets to cheer for the Estates-General, the Parisian magistrates were sent into exile. The wider significance of the crisis was underlined meanwhile in the Dutch Republic, which was overrun by a Prussian invasion in mid-September. Louis XVI had threatened to intervene if Dutch territory was violated; but, with old taxation running out and new unauthorized, Brienne advised him that he could not afford to. It was the end of the Bourbon monarchy as a military power; an admission that, even close

to its own frontiers, it could no longer pay for its international pretensions.

Within a year its domestic political authority had also evaporated. Attempts to engineer a consensual reform plan with the Paris parlement collapsed amid suspicious recriminations, and for six months the sovereign courts refused to transact business. In May 1788, a Maupeou-like attempt was made to remodel them and reduce their powers. To win public support a wide range of legal and institutional reforms were simultaneously announced, but they were ignored in the public uproar that now swept the country. Even a promise to convoke the Estates-General once the reforms had taken effect was greeted with contempt. And when, at the beginning of August, the crown's usual sources of short-term credit refused to lend more, the fate of Brienne's ministry was sealed. On 16 August, payments from the treasury were suspended. It was the bankruptcy which successive ministries had spent 30 years trying to avoid. Brienne resigned, recommending the recall of Necker. The first thing the Genevan miracle-worker did on his triumphant return to office was to proclaim that the Estates-General would meet in 1789.

The French Revolution

The convocation of a national representative assembly meant the end of absolute monarchy. It had finally succumbed to institutional and cultural paralysis. Its plans for reform fell with it. Nobody knew what the Estates-General would do, or even how it would be made up or chosen. There was a complete vacuum of power. The French Revolution was the process by which this vacuum was filled.