Chapter Five: The Enlightenment Movement

5.1. The Enlightenment and Its Origins

The eighteenth century is one of the most famous periods in the history of European thought. Historian’s often call that century the Age of Enlightenment (Age of Reason) because eighteenth-century writers complacently considered their epoch more enlightened than earlier eras. It was an age that cherished universities, learned academies, scientific laboratories and observatories, libraries, philosophic journals, books (especially great reference works),and talking about all of them.

Enlightenment movement included a number of influential thinkers and writers of the age in various countries. Its early exponents are usually identified by a French name, the philosophes, which is a broader term than philosophers in English. The importance of the Enlightenment rests in the circulation of the ideas of the philosophes among a small literate population and the influence of these ideas in changing the Old Regime. They worked to expose contemporary social and political abuses and argued that reform was necessary and possible.

The central ideas of the Enlightenment are frequently simplified to a few basic concepts. The philosophes often differed, but a few concepts were nearly universal:

1) Skepticism: questioning the validity of assumptions about society and the physical world without regard for traditional authority;

2) Belief in the existence of natural laws such as the law of gravity that governs both the social and physical worlds;

3) Confidence that human reason, rigorously applied, can discover these natural laws and establish them as the basis of human activity.

4) Optimism that the application of reason and obedience to natural laws will produce progress, leading to the perfection of human institutions.

By the second half of the century the philosophes were sufficiently safe from persecution to quarrel among them. They had stopped talking in generalities and their major advocates were addressing themselves to specific abuses. Their books and articles had become more specialized and more practical. They were more concerned with politics than with religion. Having concerned Europeans that change was a good idea; they began to suggest exactly which changes were most desirable. They had become honored figures.

One of the most eminent German philosophes, Immanuel Kant, summarized many of these attitudes in an essay of 1784 entitled “What Is Enlightenment?” His definition of Enlightenment was the liberation of individuals from direction by others. Kant held that people achieved this liberation when they resolved to use their reason and to follow its dictates. Thus, he suggested a Latin motto for the Enlightenment: Sapereaude! (Literally, “Dare to know!”), which he translated as “Have the courage to use your own reason!”

The Enlightenment developed from several trends in European thought. Skepticism had been one of the dominant themes of seventeenth-century philosophy, chiefly associated with the French philosopher René Descartes. In works such as the Discourse on Method (1637), he had advocated universal doubt; that is, the doubting of everything until it can be proven.

The writers of the Enlightenment were greatly influenced by the unanswered questions of religious and scientific certainty and uncertainty that were brought to light during the Scientific Revolution, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries change in the scientific view of the world which shook the foundations of the intellectual and theological traditions that had been formed during the Middle Ages. Because of the impact of the Scientific Revolution on the power of the human mind, the Enlightenment became a profoundly secular movement that demonstrated man’s independence from religion. In general, the Enlightenment affected the middle class and aristocracy of Europe and played almost no part at all in the lives of the lower classes.

Enlightenment thought was influenced by Sir Isaac Newton’s synthesis of the accomplishments of many scientists. Newton had built upon a scientific revolution that had destroyed the geocentric theory of the universe, instead placing the Sun at the center in a heliocentric theory. This required sweeping, counterintuitive adjustments in European thought. For the heliocentric theory to be true, the Earth must move, at tremendously high speeds, around the Sun and the Sun did not rise or set, it merely appeared to do so because the rotation of the Earth turned a viewer toward or away from the Sun. Christian theologians fought such conclusions. Catholic Church placed the writings of astronomers on the Index of prohibited books, arguing that “it is the Holy Spirit’s intention to teach us how to go to heaven, not how the heavens go.”

Enlightenment canonized Newton because he convinced the intelligentsia that the new astronomy was correct and the churches were wrong. His greatest fame resulted from stating the Principle of Universal Gravitation (the law of gravity) in his masterwork, Principia Mathematica (1687). The “universal” element of the law of gravity fascinated the philosophes of the eighteenth century. Newton proved to them that human reason could discover “the universal qualities of all bodies whatsoever.” Voltaire, who popularized Newton’s work in Elements of the Philosophy of Newton (1738), proclaimed him “the greatest and rarest genius that ever rose for the ornamentation and instruction of the species.”

Enlightenment reached its pinnacle in France. First, the international language of the educated elite in Europe was French. Second, French thinkers and writers were jailed or forced to flee the country; they were never executed for their statements. Consequently, the French thinkers never faced insurmountable odds like some thinkers and writers in Central and Eastern Europe.

The Age of Enlightenment brought with it three main ideas that were manifest in the writings of the times. First, Enlightenment thinkers believed that the methods of natural science, which were developed during the Scientific Revolution, were applicable to all aspects of life. Second, they believed the scientific method was capable of discovering the laws of human society. Third the Enlightenment thinkers believed in the possibility of both societal and individual progress and improvement for humans. In other words, the thinkers of the Enlightenment believed in the power of reason and in the power of the human mind to discover the laws that govern man and society. They also believed that the application of these laws to society could improve both man and society. Overall, the Enlightenment was a time of optimism.

Although some of the important intellectuals of the Enlightenment were the skeptics, such as Pierre Bayle (1647–1706). Pierre Bayle had even taken the dramatic step of applying skeptical philosophy to the Bible. Bayle, a Frenchman whose advanced ideas forced him to live in the greater freedom of Holland, proposed “a detailed refutation of the unreasonable deference given to tradition,” he included Christianity within that tradition. All religious questions, including the reading of the Bible, “require the use of reason.” The philosophes claimed that they were bringing knowledge to Europe. They believed that they were shedding light on the dark, uneducated continent. They sought to educate the public or educated middle class. They saw no need to educate the people, or the commoners of Europe, who the philosophes regarded as ignorant and deeply affected by superstition.

5.2. Natural Law, Reason and Progress

When the scientific revolution convinced the European intelligentsia that natural laws existed, the philosophes concluded that laws governing human activity, the organization of governments, economic relations, the efficient operation of prisons and the writing of history similarly “lay hid in night.” Such laws merely awaited the Newton of economics or penology. The belief in natural law was not new; ancient authors had asserted its existence, too. The scientific revolution merely allowed thinkers to embrace this old idea with a new self-confidence.

One of the leading figures of the French Enlightenment, the Baron Charles-Louis de Montesquieu, illustrates this interest in natural law in his writings on political theory. Montesquieu was a wealthy provincial noble, educated in law, who inherited a position in the Parliament of Bordeaux. Although he was elected the chief justice of the parliament, he was more interested in theories of government than in the day-to-day drudgery of his highly political job. He sold his office such positions were often the property of nobles in the eighteenth century and turned to writing. His The Spirit of the Laws (1748) became one of the most widely influential books of the century, joining the seventeenth-century works of John Locke, who had attacked the divine right of royalty and asserted the divine royalty of right, in laying the foundations of modern political theory.

Montesquieu began The Spirit of the Laws by asserting that people, like the physical world, are “governed by invariable laws.” This did not mean laws promulgated by the government and enforced by the courts; Montesquieu called that type of law “positive laws.” Instead, Montesquieu meant laws in a scientific sense; laws that exist in nature, laws that state “fixed and invariable relationships” just as much as the law of gravity did. For example, Montesquieu believed that natural law proclaimed the need for food and the attraction of the sexes. Other natural laws governing human relations were less certain. Montesquieu, for example, asserted that people were, by nature, peaceful rather than warlike. One of the consequences of asserting the existence of natural laws and trying to define them was that they might be different from the positive laws enforced by the government or the moral laws of the established church. Philosophes such as Montesquieu insisted that positive law must therefore be changed to agree with natural law. “The intelligent world,” he wrote, “is far from being so well governed as the physical.”

References to “nature” and “nature’s law” are found in a great variety of eighteenth-century works in addition to Newton’s physics, Pope’s poetry, and Montesquieu’s political theory. The most typical work of the Enlightenment was the French Encyclopedia of the Arts and Sciences (the Encyclopédie) devoted three full articles to natural law. Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote one of the famous books in the history of education, Emile, or Concerning Education (1762), stressing natural education. “Nature,” he wrote, “never deceives us; it is always we who deceive ourselves.” The first draft of the American Declaration of Independence proclaimed that people were entitled to independence and self-government by “the Laws of Nature.” Not all philosophes used the theory of natural law, however. But even those who rejected it as did the Scottish philosopher David Hume, who called it a “fallacious and sophistical” theory, discussed the idea at length.

To discover natural laws, the philosophes relied on skepticism and rationalism. Skepticism meant questioning and criticizing everything. “A thing is not proved when no one has ever questioned it,” wrote one of the editors of the Encyclopédie. “Skepticism is the first step toward the truth.” Kant insisted upon the skeptical evaluation of everything, including church and state, in the Critique of Pure Reason (1781) our age is the age of criticism to which everything must be subjected. But, if they are exempted, they become the subjects of just suspicion and cannot lay claim to sincere respect, which reason accords only to that which has stood the test of a free and public examination. Most philosophes shared this glorification of reason. Montesquieu stressed that reason must be the basis of law. American philosophe, Thomas Jefferson, advised: “Fix reason firmly in her seat, and call on her tribunal for every fact, every opinion.” Denis Diderot, the coeditor of the Encyclopedia, wrote that the philosophe must be “actuated in everything by reason.”

One of the first popes directly rejected reason as the standard of the church, arguing that “[i]f the word of God could be comprehended by reason, it would no longer be wonderful.” The conflict between reason and faith had interested many thinkers across the centuries, but faith had remained the Christian standard even after the Protestant Reformation, when Martin Luther had condemned reason as “the Devil’s Harlot.”

The French mathematician Jean d’Alembert, Diderot’s co-editor of the Encyclopédie, thought “it is impossible to deny that philosophy has shown progress among us. Day by day natural science accumulates new riches.” The greatest champion of the doctrine of progress was another French mathematician, the marquis Antoine de Condorcet, who’s Progress of the Human Spirit (1795) foresaw nothing less than “the indefinite perfectibility of the human race”a passage written shortly before Condorcet died in a prison of the French Revolution.

The Enlightenment had equally grave implications for the monarchical governments of the Old Regime. The same application of skepticism and rationalism the same search for natural laws meant criticism of monarchy and aristocratic privilege. Rousseau, for example, bluntly styled himself “Jean-Jacques Rousseau, enemy of kings” and did not hesitate to sign letters to Frederick the Great that way. Diderot was more dramatic with his hostility: “Let us strangle the last king with the guts of the last priest!”

Voltaire, who had good reasons to despise the powerful, treated them to the same acidic ridicule in Candide(1759) as churchmen received. In Candide he attacked war, religious persecution and what he regarded as unwarranted optimism about the human condition. Like most philosophes, he believed that human society could and should be improved. But he was never certain that reform, if achieved, would be permanent.

The criticism of a monarch who could imprison authors without a trial was a risky business. Voltaire’s stays in the Bastille and Diderot’s in the prison at Vincennes are only two of the most famous examples of the attempts to control troublesome writers. A study of French records has shown that the police kept thorough files on French authors; fully 10 percent of all writers in 1750 had spent some time in prison, usually the Bastille. The police used royal letters de cachet to pursue such critics of the government, especially pamphleteers. Authors risked public whippings or even life sentences to the galleys for publishing their ideas. And the works of even the most famous writers were regularly censored by many authorities. Rousseau’s Emile, for example, was not only condemned by the Catholic Church and placed on the Index of prohibited books, but it was also condemned by the Sorbonne (University of Paris), the General Assembly of the Clergy, and the Parliament of Paris. Fortunately for Rousseau, only his book was burnt in a public ceremony.

Consequently, early eighteenth-century writers sought indirect ways, such as Voltaire’s satires, to make their point. When Archbishop François Fénelon wanted to criticize the king, he hid his satire in the form of an ancient epic. Fénelon’s Télémaque reports the travels of the son of the Homeric hero, Ulysses; by describing Telemachus’s visits to strange lands, Fénelon could comment on many forms of government and hide his comments on France. The book was banned and consigned to public fires anyway. Montesquieu similarly disguised his first critical comments in an epistolary novel (a novel in the form of letters), The Persian Letters (1721). These fictional letters were purportedly written by Persian visitors to Europe, whose naive comments hid barbs. One letter, for example, explains that the king of Spain owns many gold mines, but the king of France (who owns none) is richer because he has found a way to make unlimited money from the vanity of his subjects: He sells them offices, titles, and honors.

Claude Helvetius, a rich government official under Louis XV, made one of the most vigorous attacks in 1758. His De l’esprit (“Essays on the Mind”) was blunt: “To limit the press is to insult the nation; to prohibit the reading of certain books is to declare the people to be either fools or slaves.” His book was condemned by the parliament and burnt by the public executioner in 1759. In England, where the tolerance of ideas was slightly greater but censorship was practiced nonetheless—even jurists gave the philosophes some support. William Blackstone, a judge, a member of parliament, and one of the founders of modern university training in law, published four volumes of the extremely influential Commentaries on the Laws of England (1765–69). He cautiously concluded: “The liberty of the press is indeed essential to the nature of a free state, but this consists in laying no previous restraints upon publication, not in the freedom from censure for criminal matter when published.”

As with the parallel battle against religious intolerance, not everyone agreed with the attack upon censorship. Conservatives rallied to the defense of the government, just as they stood by the church. Samuel Johnson, a journalist and lexicographer, is a good example. Johnson was a deeply conservative man who despised writers such as Voltaire and Rousseau and thought it a splendid idea that writers of their sort should be sent to penal colonies. And he stoutly defended censorship: “No member of society has a right to teach any doctrine contrary to what society holds to be true.”

As the Enlightenment progressed, political writers became bolder in their criticism. The opposition of Louis XV, the French courts, and the Catholic Church did not stop the publication of the Encyclopédie. Its essay on “Government” shows how radical the criticism had become. It stated that society exists under a civil constitution that invests rulers with their power, but those rulers are “bound therein by the laws of nature and by the law of reason.” Nature and reason both dictated that the “purpose in any form of government [is] the welfare” of civil society. Thus, the bold argument continued, society should expect “to abrogate laws that are flaws in a state” and even to revoke “the allegiance and the jurisdiction in which they are born,” by changing the government.

Voltaire returned to France from his exile in England (1726–29) filled with similar willingness to write of his opposition to absolutism. His Philosophical Letters (1734) praised the English for their form of government and suggested it as a model for the rest of Europe. “The English nation,” he wrote, “is the only one of earth that has successfully regulated the power of its kings by resisting them; and which, after repeated efforts, has established that beneficial government under which the Prince is restrained from doing ill.” Baron Montesquieu produced the most widely studied political analysis of the era. He proposed features of the ideal government, however, such as “liberty,” which he carefully defined: “Liberty does not consist in an unlimited freedom. Liberty is a right of doing whatever the laws permit.

This line of reasoning led Montesquieu to state two of the most famous political theories of the eighteenth century:

1. The theory of the separation of powers and (2) the theory of checks and balances. Montesquieu first argued that the centers of power within the state the executive, the legislative, and the judicial powers should not be held by the same person or institution.

“When the legislative and executive powers are united in the same person there can be no liberty.” He then added that these separated centers of power should check and balance each other: “Power should be a check to power.” Such ideas had many dramatic implications for the eighteenth century. They meant, for example, that powerful institutions controlled by the aristocracy, such as the French parliament’s, must check the potential despotism of a king.

By the late eighteenth century, the Enlightenment produced even more radical political arguments. Tom Paine, the son of a quiet English Quaker family who became an active participant in both the American and the French revolutions, wrote passionate pamphlets and carefully reasoned multivolume works of political theory. One of his pamphlets, Common Sense (1776), attacked monarchical government and advocated a republic arguments aimed at the British colonies in America. His Rights of Man (1791–92) defended the legislation of the French Revolution, attacked monarchical government, and called on the English to overthrow George III. The government of Britain indicted him for treason.

Perhaps the most radical political theorist of the Enlightenment was Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a Rousseau’s The Social Contract (1762) opened with one of the most famous sentences of the Enlightenment: “Man is born free, but is everywhere in chains.” The great human emancipation that Rousseau desired led him to propose an ideal government that mixed democracy and authoritarianism. Rousseau, the enemy of kings, admired democracy and stimulated its growth in Europe with sentences such as: “No man has a natural authority over his fellow men.” This reasoning led Rousseau to state the right of people to use force to resist forced obedience to authority: “As soon as [a people] can throw off its yoke, and does throw it off, it does better; for a people may certainly use, for the recovery of their liberty, the same right that was employed to deprive them of it.” Rousseau also believed, however, that democracy would only work with “a people who were Gods.”

Chapter Six

The French Revolution from 1789–1815

6.1. The Origins of the French Revolution

The French Revolution grew from the combination of an intractable economic crisis and the inability of the government to govern. King Louis XVI could neither raise taxes nor pay his bills. A recession and falling prices hurt farmers and workers. Manufacturing suffered in competition with the English, especially in the textile industry. Unemployment reached dangerous levels, passing eighty thousand in Paris in December 1788 (approximately one-third of the adult workforce), while poor harvests in 1787–88 produced shortages of wheat, which rose in price to record levels by mid–1789. The price of bread in Paris, normally eight or nine sous for a four-pound loaf, hit 14.5 sous.

Ominous signs were evident in 1788–89 that France was a volatile society. Bread riots occurred in many districts. Some villages refused to ship their grain. The crowds typically forced sales at “the just price” (an old Christian idea); in Rouen, for example, they cut the price of bread in half.

Historians generally agree that such troubles became a revolution when four overlapping movements converged.

(1) An aristocratic revolution had been building for many years, as aristocrats used institutions such as the parliament’s to thwart the king, especially on tax reform. This revolution forced Louis XVI to hold elections for the Estates General in 1789.

(2) A bourgeois revolution challenged the aristocratic leadership of the reform movement and sought to limit aristocratic control of high government offices.

(3) A peasant revolution went beyond disturbances over grain and became an armed uprising against the remnants of feudalism. This rebellion connected the common people to the reformers and made it extremely difficult for Louis XVI to act against them.

(4) An urban working-class revolution turned the fury of the crowd to large political targets.

6.2. The Estates General and the Beginning of the Revolution

Faced with bankruptcy, Louis XVI promised his critics in November 1787 that he would hold elections for the Estates General (the first since 1614) within five years. Under continuing pressure, Louis finally agreed that representatives from each of the three estates (the clergy, the aristocracy, and all others) that comprised the population of France could assemble in May 1789. His decision launched the first modern political debate in French history.

The most famous of these was written by a provincial priest, the abbé Emmanuel Sieyès (1748–1836), who defended the third estate in a work, entitled What Is the Third Estate? Sieyès’s answer was “Everything!” The aristocracy, he added, was like “some horrible disease eating the living flesh of some unfortunate man.” Louis XVI agreed to double the representation of the third estate, but he insisted upon preserving traditions—the estates would meet separately. He permitted freedom of the press for the elections and asked that each district submit statements of their grievances (cahiers des doléances). Most cahiers condemned absolutism and praised constitutional monarchy; many pledged loyalty to Louis XVI, but none acknowledged his “divine right.” They called for a French parliament to control taxation and legislation. The cahiers attacked hated aspects of the Old Regime (such as the arbitrary royal power of arrest by letters de cachet) and demanded new freedoms (such as freedom of the press). Each cahier also expressed the interests of the estate that produced it. The first estate, for example, wanted clerical control of education, denounced immorality in the press, and objected to the toleration of Protestantism.

The Estates General met in Versailles, a short walk from the royal palace. It opened with a royal speech asking for new taxes. The deputies of the third estate, chiefly lawyers, rejected holding such discussions in separate meetings, and they asked other deputies to join them in legislating reforms. Nine priests agreed, and the combined group proclaimed itself the French National Assembly. A political revolution had begun. The deputies were locked out of their meeting hall, so they assembled at a nearby indoor tennis court and swore not to adjourn without preparing a constitution. Within a few days, 612 of 621 deputies of the third estate had signed the Tennis Court Oath; 149 priests and a few nobles joined them.

The king naturally resisted these events. He did not panic because he had learned from dealing with the parliaments that he could suspend their business, transfer the meeting to a distant province, or even arrest troublesome leaders. Thus, he simply declared the decisions of the third estate illegal. He offered the hope of a constitution, with important reservations. “The King wills,” he said, “that the traditional distinctions between the three orders of the state should be preserved in its entirety.” Deputies of the defiant third estate chose to continue the National Assembly. As one liberal deputy, the Count de Mirabeau (1749–91), said, “We shall not leave our places except by the power of bayonet.” Louis considered using the army but his ability to use French troops against the National Assembly was uncertain. Few were stationed in Versailles, and their loyalty was dubious. One regiment had refused to fire on demonstrators and another had vowed not to act against the third estate. So Louis called in German and Swiss reinforcements from the provinces (foreigners constituted 25 percent of his army). He still felt confident enough to do nothing when the National Assembly discussed a constitution. The revolution, however, quickly passed beyond his ability to control it.

6.3. The Revolutionary Crowd: The Bastille and the Great Fear

The political revolution begun by the aristocracy and expanded by the deputies of the third estate changed in July 1789, driven by crowds of commoners in both town and country. The revolutionary crowd (“the mob” to hostile observers) has been the subject of historical controversy. Some authors depict the crowds as purely destructive and conclude that they were comprised of criminals, vagabonds, and the unemployed. Edmund Burke, the most eloquent enemy of the revolution, called the crowd “a band of cruel ruffians and assassins.” Recent study, however, has shown that the revolutionary crowds were comprised of wage earners, journey men, artisans and shopkeepers.

The Parisian crowd changed the revolution in July 1789. The price of bread, fear of foreign troops, concern that the National Assembly would be closed, and the agitation of revolutionary orators (notably Camille Desmoulins, a twenty-nine-year-old radical lawyer) created a volatile situation. On July 11, the king dismissed his most popular advisor, Jacques Necker alarming moderates. Parisians burned the customs gates to the city, as a protest against the tariffs that they blamed for the high price of bread and wine. The next day, German soldiers fired on a crowd, and a riot followed. On the morning of July 14, eight thousand people attacked a royal barracks and took thirty-two thousand muskets and twelve artillery pieces. They used those arms later that day in the most famous act of the revolutionary crowd—the attack on the Bastille. The Bastille was a formidable fortress, towering nearly one hundred feet over eastern Paris. It was less important for the seven prisoners it held than as a symbol of despotism, in which such famous prisoners as Voltaire had been confined. (Studies have found that 10 percent of all French writers of the eighteenth century were locked up in the Bastille at least once.) Perhaps more important, it held five tons of gunpowder, defended by only eighty-two French soldiers and thirty-two Swiss. During a four-hour battle on July 14 (which became a French national holiday), one soldier and ninety-eight civilians were killed. The victorious crowd, which included many cabinetmakers and cobblers but no lawyers, finished the day with an act that led to their image as a blood-thirsty mob: the brutal murder of the governor of the Bastille. Louis XVI spent the day hunting; his diary entry for July 14 read: “Nothing.” The next day, stunned by the news from Paris, he went to the National Assembly and promised to withdraw the provincial troops.

Neither the king nor the National Assembly had adjusted to the insurrection in Paris when similar events occurred in rural France. The rural disturbances of July and August 1789, known as “the great fear,” were a response to rumors. Some rumors held that the king wished to liberate the peasantry but expected them to take the lead. Worse rumors held that aristocrats, frustrated by events in Versailles, were preparing some terrible revenge or that armies of vagrants (whose numbers were high) were to be set loose on the peasantry. Peasants armed themselves in self-defense. When brigands did not appear, the frightened population turned their anxiety on the chateaux of their seigneurs. Some aristocrats were forced to renounce their feudal rights.

6.4. The Legislative Revolution of the National Assembly, 1789–91

The actions of the Parisian crowd and the peasantry had two important effects on the National Assembly (also called the Constituent Assembly because it was writing a constitution).

First, they strengthened the assembly because the king could not suppress it without fear of violence.

Second, the rebellions encouraged the deputies to extend the revolution.

A legislative revolution began on “the night of August 4th.” Debates on the great fear led to a remarkable scene: Some aristocrats proposed ending their own privileges. Without preparation or committee studies, the deputies voted a series of decrees that began with:

“The National Assembly completely abolishes the feudal regime.” The night of August 4 marked the end of feudal servitude and taxes, the feudal rights of the aristocracy (such as hunting on peasant farmland), the manorial courts of aristocratic justice, “tithes of every description” owed to the Catholic Church, and the sale of public offices, which were opened to all citizens.

Three weeks later, the National Assembly adopted another historic document, a French bill of rights named the Declaration of the Rights of Man. It promised freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, due process of law, and the prohibition of cruel and unusual punishment. It did not grant equal rights to religious minorities (Protestants received this in December 1789; Jews had to wait until September 1791), freedom for the black slaves in French colonies (adopted in February 1794), or equal rights for women (which the revolution never accepted)—but in 1789 it was the greatest statement of human rights in Europe.

Historians call those days on which the action of the crowd changed the course of events “revolutionary journey” (“revolutionary days”). The angry housewives and working women of Paris led such a journey on October 5, 1789. Their target was the king. When Louis blocked the August reforms, talk circulated in Paris about a march to Versailles to bring him to Paris. On the rainy Monday morning of October 5, the women of Paris did just that. A procession of several thousand set out for Versailles, chanting “Let’s fetch the baker!” A few hours later, a reluctant Lafayette led the National Guard to support them. After a small clash on the grounds of the royal palace, Louis XVI agreed to accept the August decrees and to move into his Tuileries Palace (today the Louvre Museum) in Paris.

The move to Paris stimulated the growth of political clubs (the precursors of political parties), which became one of the distinguishing features of the revolution. These clubs had roots in the salons of the Old Regime, organizations such as Masonic lodges, and the excited political meetings of 1788–89. They became the voice of Parisian radicalism and then the center of revolutionary power. One of the most influential clubs was the Cordeliers, named for a Catholic order whose monastery it rented. The Cordeliers included three of the most prominent radicals of the city: Camille Desmoulins (the orator who helped to precipitate the attack on the Bastille), Jean-Paul Marat (a physician whose radical newspaper, the Friend of the People, had shaped the journey of October 5), and Georges Danton (a radical lawyer who had married into middle-class wealth and purchased a venal office in the royal courts). The most important club, the Jacobins, drew their name from a rented Jacobin convent and their membership from Parisian small businessmen. The Jacobins were especially influential because their membership included more than two hundred deputies. Jacobins ranged from moderates such as Lafayette to radicals such as Robespierre, but the latter soon predominated. In the first year, the club grew to more than twelve hundred members and 150 affiliated provincial clubs. The term Jacobinism soon entered political discourse to identify their militant ideas and actions.

In November 1789 the revolutionary, and nonreligious, bishop of, Charles Talleyrand, convinced the assembly to “put at the disposal of the nation” all lands belonging to the church. This confiscated a huge amount of land typically 20 percent of the farm land in a region, although it reached 40 percent in some areas. The assembly then sold interest-bearing bonds, called assigned, secured by this land. The assigned gradually circulated as revolutionary paper money. The notes could be redeemed for land and the value of the land was sufficient to cover them, but the public had little confidence in paper money, so assigned depreciated in value. By late 1792 inflation had taken 40 percent of their value.

Other legislation on the church followed. The loss of its lands and the abolition of the mandatory tithe left the church with limited income. This led the assembly to create a new relationship between the church and the state, known as the Civil Constitution of the Clergy of July 1790. The Civil Constitution converted priests into state employees and doubled their salaries, but it cut the number, income, and powers of the aristocratic bishops by changing their posts into elective state of¬fices. Clerics had to swear loyalty to the constitution or be removed from office. By mid-1791, 60 percent of French priests (the “juring,” or constitutional, clergy) had accepted this arrangement; more than 95 percent of the bishops refused.

The legislative revolution proceeded rapidly. The assembly addressed the economic crisis by abolishing internal tariffs (October 1790), nationalizing royal land (May 1790), and creating a land tax (November 1790). It sought governmental efficiency by reorganizing local government (December 1789) by abolishing the parliaments (September 1790). It decreed the civil equality of Protestants (December 1789) and ex-slaves (May 1791). And it continued to attack the elites of the Old Regime: The assembly abolished monasteries and most religious orders (February1790) and then the nobility (June 1790).

One of its most far-reaching reforms, however, restricted the rights of workers. The Chapelier Law of June 1791 abolished the guilds and outlawed trade unions, shaping French labor history for nearly a century.

One omission in this torrent of reform was women’s rights, despite the active role of women in the revolution. The pamphlet campaign of early 1789 had included women’s grievances; one petition to the king, for example, had called for educational and economic opportunities. A few women in religious orders had voted for representatives of the first estate. More than adozen women had been among the conquerors of the Bastille. Women had led demonstrations over bread and the march on Versailles. They had formed political clubs, such as Théroigne de Méricourt’s Friends of the Law, which was denied affiliation by the Cordeliers. And when the Declaration of the Rights of Man failed to mention women, Olympe de Gouges responded with a brilliant manifesto entitled Declaration of the Rights of Women (1791). “Man, are you capable of being just?” she asked. Although a few men, such as Condorcet, responded supportively, the answer remained no. Traditional attitudes about the role of women in society persisted; fears about the subservience of women to the church abounded, and a multitude of arguments (such as the lesser education of women) were advanced to perpetuate male dominance. Soon, the revolutionaries even closed women’s clubs.

Before the Constitution of 1791 took effect, another dramatic event changed the course of the French Revolution. On June 20, 1791, Louis XVI fled for the eastern frontier. A postmaster recognized the king, and at the village of Varennes the National Guard arrested him. Louis XVI returned to Paris as a prisoner. “There is no longer a king in France,” he said. His flight to Varennes led to talk of abolishing the monarchy and creating a republic. For more than a year after the king’s arrest, however, the revolutionary government allowed an aristocrat to continue publishing a royalist newspaper on his behalf.

6.5. Europe and the Revolution

The most dramatic expression of this in France had been emigration from the country. The émigrés (those who fled) had been led by the king’s younger brother and future successor, the count of Artois, who left in July 1789. Each major event of the revolution increased the number of émigrés. The total ultimately reached 104,000. Adding twenty-five thousand people who were deported (chiefly nonjuring priests), 2 percent to 3 percent of the population left France. In contrast, counterrevolutionary emigration to Canada during the American Revolution took 3 to 5 percent of the population. The émigrés concentrated in Koblenz and other towns near the border where they sought assistance from the crowned heads of Europe, aided rebellions in southern France, and built ties to nonjuring priests, especially in western France where a bitter civil war would soon be fought.

The émigrés got little help at first. European opinion was divided, but it was generally more favorable to the revolution than to émigré nobles. The English poet William Wordsworth summarized the enthusiasm of the educated classes in a few lines of poetry: “Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, but to be young was very heaven!” Such opinions were not limited to intellectuals. Charles James Fox, a leader of the Whig Party in Britain, called the revolution “much the greatest event that ever happened, and much the best.”

The earliest opponent of the French Revolution was King Charles IV of Spain who was horrified by the treatment of the Catholic Church, but Spain was too weak to intervene. Catherine the Great of Russia dreaded the menace of French revolutionary ideas, but she was too far away to act, except against her own intelligentsia. The Habsburg emperors Joseph II and Leopold II carefully watched events in France because their sister, Marie Antoinette, was the queen and a target of popular abuse, but they initially accepted French reforms.

The most thoughtful critic of the revolution was Fox’s rival in the House of Commons, Edmund Burke. Burke became one of the founders of modern conservatism with his attack on the revolution, Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790). “France,” he wrote, “by the perfidy of her leaders, has utterly disgraced the tone of lenient council.” The revolution was an “undignified calamity.” The most influential early enemy of the revolution was Pope Pius VI who chiefly directed his anger at the Civil Constitution because it removed the church from papal control. In April 1791 he sent the encyclical letter Caritas to French bishops, forbidding the oath to the constitution. That oath, Pius insisted, was “the poisoned fountainhead and source of all errors.” The French assembly answered by annexing the papal territory of Avignon (once the seat of the medieval papacy). Soon the French ambassador at Rome had been murdered, Parisian crowds had burnt the pope in effigy, and Pius VI had become a leader of the European counterrevolution.

European opinion gradually became polarized. As a Dutch conservative wrote in 1791, two parties were forming in all nations. One, a party of popular sovereignty and democratization, attacked all governments “except those arising from the free consent of those who submit to it.” The other party held traditional values and, therefore, counterrevolutionary sentiments. It accepted government “by one or several persons over the mass of the people, a government of divine origin and supported by the church.” The French Revolution was only the largest part of a democratic revolution that included liberal Polish nobles struggling against Russian influence; English dissenters campaigning for parliamentary reform; Rhineland Jews seeking emancipation; Irish peasants dreaming of French aid against the English; and Dutch, Belgian, and Swiss “patriots” who revived earlier rebellions.

6.6 The Legislative Assembly and the Wars of the Revolution

Elections for the Legislative Assembly took place in the aftermath of the flight to Varennes and the promulgation of Caritas and the Brunswick Manifesto. The new assembly of 745 deputies left a permanent mark on political discourse as a coincidence of its seating arrange-ment in a semicircular amphitheatre. As a speaker faced the assembled deputies, conservative members who defended the king sat on the right side. This group, led by members of the Feuillant Club, became the Right. On the left wing sat the radical members from the Jacobin and Cordeliers clubs. Less militant revolutionaries, who later became known as the Girondins (because many came from the region of the Gironde), sat in the middle. Thus was born the political vocabulary of “left,” “right,” and “center.

International tension distracted the Legislative Assembly from further reform. Instead, the assembly adopted legislation against the émigrés, branding those who did not return as conspirators. In February 1792 the state seized their property. Similar decrees against nonjuring priests followed in November 1792. Such legislation worsened French relations with the Austro-Prussian alliance. In March 1792 a belligerent, counterrevolutionary Francis II had succeeded to the Habsburg throne. By this time, the Girondins, whose foreign policy was more radical than their revolutionary aims, dominated the French assembly. They argued that war with the counterrevolutionaries would rally the French to defend the revolution, test the sympathies of Louis XVI, and export the revolution to other peoples.

The leading Girondist, Jacques Brissot, said simply: “War is a blessing to the nation.” Francis II and Brissot had led their countries to war by April 1792.

A Prussian army invaded eastern France in August 1792 and won several victories, but the course of the war shifted in September when a French army under General Charles Dumouriez defeated the Prussians in an artillery duel near the town of Valmy, bolstering re-publican enthusiasm. In the words of the German poet Johann von Goethe, the battle of Valmy meant that “here and today begins a new age in the history of the world.” This was poetic exaggeration, but it made a point: The allies would not quickly crush the French Revolution. A few weeks later, Dumouriez and an army of forty-five thousand underscored that point by marching into Habsburg lands on France’s northern border (today’s Belgium) and winning a decisive victory at the town of Jemappes.

The War of 1792 grew into the War of the First Coalition (1793–95) when Britain, Spain, and Russia joined the alliance against the revolution, which had become passionately antimonarchical. Though this seemed like one of the most unevenly matched wars in history, the French not only survived it, but they also occupied the lowlands, the German Rhineland, and Northern Italy. They were able to do so because the revolution, among its other accomplishments, transformed the nature of modern warfare.

France had a larger population than most of her rivals, and in the early years of the revolution high unemployment made recruitment easy. The army grew from 180,000 men in 1789 to 650,000 in 1793. Then in August 1793 the assembly decreed universal military conscription (the levée en masse), placing the entire nation “in permanent requisition for army service.” France soon had an unprecedented one million men in uniform. A conscript army of this size could not function according to the time-honored rules of European warfare. Though armed with the proceeds of revolutionary confiscations, it could feed itself only by living off the lands it conquered. Moreover, tactics had to be revised because intensive training had become impossible. Under reforms adopted by “the organizer of victory,” Lazare Carnot, the French infantry advanced in deep columns instead of the traditional line, taking advantage of its superior numbers and revolutionary enthusiasm to overwhelm more disciplined enemies.

6.7 The First Republic:

The War of 1792 changed the revolution and led to the abolition of the monarchy and the creation of a republic. Once again, the Parisian crowd took the initiative. Austro-Prussian threats on Louis XVI’s behalf inspired demonstrations against the king, including an attack on the Tuileries Palace. The Legislative Assembly then suspended Louis’s remaining powers and reenacted all legislation he had vetoed. Then, in “the revolution of August 10th” the assembly decided to create a new legislature. It would be called the Convention in honor of the Constitutional Convention recently held in America. Representatives to the Convention would be elected by universal manhood suffrage, and they would write a more democratic constitution. Among its final acts, the Legislative Assembly moved Louis XVI to a royal prison and urged the Convention to abolish the monarchy.

The late summer of 1792 also saw ominous hints of revolutionary authoritarianism. The assembly sent commissioners into provincial France hoping to rally support, but their powers often created opposition. Then the assembly required a loyalty oath of all government employees, and it gave those who refused two weeks to leave the country. Other laws permitted searches of homes for arms and counterrevolutionary suspects. The attack on the Catholic Church also continued. All surviving Catholic associations (such as teaching orders) were abolished, religious processions and public ceremonies were prohibited, and divorce was legalized.

Elections for the Convention thus took place in volatile circumstances. The 749 new deputies were chiefly lawyers (47.7 percent); fifty-five were priests and several others were former aristocrats, including Louis’s revolutionary cousin, the former duke of Orléans, now called Philippe Egalité . The deputies were young two-thirds were under age forty-four. No faction held a majority, but universal suffrage and the war produced a radical body. Jacobins and their allies, called Montagnards (mountain dwellers) because they sat in the upper levels, accounted for 40 percent of the seats; their ranks included a Parisian delegation led by such radicals as Danton, Marat, and Robespierre. The Girondins and their allies, led by Bris-sot and Roland, fell to less than 25 percent. The first year of the Convention was a struggle for predominance between these two factions, and the Jacobins won.

. The French republic, proclaimed in 1792, convicted the former Louis XVI of treason for the crime of plotting with the foreign powers that had invaded France. He was executed in January 1793 in a large public square, located at the end of the former royal gardens. In this illustration the crowd is shown the head of the king. The square where the guillotine stood, previously known as “Place Louis XV” and renamed “Place de la Revolution,” is today known by the peace making name of “Place de la Concorde.”

The Convention proclaimed a new order during its first week. Deputies voted unanimously to abolish the monarchy and create a republic. A committee began work on a new constitution, to be submitted to the people for ratification. When the Convention later in-vented a new calendar, this week in September would begin the New Year and September 1792 started Year I of the republican era.

The success of republican armies in 1792–93 meant that the greatest issue before the Convention became the fate of Louis XVI. A committee recommended that he be tried for treason, based upon his secret contacts with the governments that had invaded France. The trial of the king before the Convention began in December. Few doubted his guilt, revealed by his secret correspondence, and the deputies convicted him by a vote of 683–0. The debate over his sentence, however, caused bitter divisions. Jacobins advocated the normal death penalty. Pas-sionate speakers insisted that “[k]ings are in the moral order what monsters are in the natural.” Many leaders of the revolution, such as the abbé Sieyès, favored executions; even the king’s cousin voted with the regicides. Louis XVI was condemned by a vote of 387–334 and beheaded on the guillotine in January 1793.

War consequently dominated the life of the Convention (1792–95) but deputies still aspired to reform society. Noteworthy laws envisioned schools open to all citizens. Robespierre, who had long championed the rights of minorities, scored his greatest triumph with the abolition of slavery in French colonies (February 1794), pushing the republic far ahead of Britain or the United States. The Convention’s constitution, adopted in June 1793 and known as the Constitution of the Year I, summarized much of this egalitarian idealism. It began with an expanded version of the Declaration of the Rights of Man; stating, “The aim of society is the common welfare.” That led to a constitutional assertion (Article Twenty-one) of the welfare state: “Every French citizen has a right to existence.

Public assistance is a sacred debt. Society owes subsistence to its unfortunate citizens, either in providing work for them, or in assuring the means of existence for those who are unable to work.”

6.8. Civil War and the Reign of Terror

Whatever the intentions and accomplishments of the Convention, it is chiefly remembered for one of the most horrifying periods of modern history, the Reign of Terror (1793–94), when thousands of people were publicly executed. At the same time, a bloody civil war took tens of thousands of lives. The central issue in both tragedies was whether the revolution or the counterrevolution would prevail.

The crisis began with the war against the European coalition. In early 1793 the Austrians defeated the armies of General Dumouriez in the Austrian Netherlands and moved toward the French frontier. While the French braced themselves for an invasion, Dumouriez stunned them by defecting to the allies, making military catastrophe seem imminent. In addition to the Austrians on the northern frontier, Prussians were besieging French forts in the east, Italian troops were invading from the southeast, the Spanish army had crossed the southern border, and the English navy was threatening several ports. In Paris, many people agreed that the war effort required desperate measures.

The Convention’s efforts to defend France, however, enlarged the problem. Plans to draft 300,000 men produced anti draft riots across France, chiefly in the west. By March 1793 peasant rebels in the Atlantic region of the Vendée had won several battles against the government. The Convention soon had to take units of the regular army from the frontier to combat the Vendéens, who now called themselves the Royal Catholic Army. Resistance to the Convention spread quickly, particularly to cities that resented the centralized control of Paris. In May 1793 moderates in Lyons overthrew the Jacobin municipal government. Their federalist revolt soon reached Marseilles and Toulon, and by the summer of 1793 the federalists were as great a problem as the Royal Catholic Army. When the new government of Lyons executed the deposed Jacobin mayor, the Convention sent an army to besiege the city. Ironically, the republic also faced an uprising from people who felt that the revolution had not yet gone far enough. The French colony of Saint Domingue (today Haiti) faced a slave rebellion supported by the English and the Spanish.

The context of the Reign of Terror, therefore, was a desperate fight to save the republic and the revolution. The men of the Convention, who had executed Louis XVI, were also fighting for their lives, and they chose harsh measures. The revolution had already turned toward authoritarianism under the Legislative Assembly. The Convention went much further, reducing newly won liberties to a Jacobin dictatorship. Enactment of the constitution was postponed and severe laws adopted. Advocacy of a monarchical restoration and economic crimes such as hoarding were made capital crimes, to be tried before a special Revolutionary Tribunal. The freedom of the press to criticize the revolution was curtailed.

The Committee of Public Safety defended the revolution ferociously. In June 1793 the Convention was purged of moderate deputies, chiefly Girondins. A Reign of Terror, directed against spies, traitors, counter revolutionaries, profiteers, hoarders, and corrupt officials had begun. Leaders of the Convention spoke with extraordinary candor. Danton called for them to “drink the blood of the enemies of humanity.” Louis Saint-Just, an uncompromising twenty-six-year-old terrorist, was even more chilling: “Punish not only traitors, but even the indifferent.” Maximilien Robespierre soon dominated the Committee of Public Safety (see document 21.3). The puritanical provincial lawyer who had built his career as an opponent of capital punishment and a defender of human rights led a terror that he defined as “nothing but prompt, severe, inflexible justice.” The instrument of this severe justice was the guillotine, a machine for human decapitation. The guillotine became a gruesome symbol of the terror, crudely called “the republican razor” or “the widow” (because it made so many). It had been introduced, however, by a physician, Dr. Joseph Guillotine, as a humanitarian form of swift execution, in contrast to the horrible tortures employed by the Old Regime such as being broken on the wheel or drawn and quartered.

The Reign of Terror lasted for thirteen months, from June 1793 until July 1794. During those months, tribunals around France ordered an estimated fourteen thousand to seventeen thousand executions; the most famous, the Revolutionary Tribunal of Paris, accounted for more than twenty-seven hundred (see table 21.2). The overwhelming majority of the executions (71 percent) were in regions of civil war, especially the Vendée; of those, 75 percent were rebels caught with weapons in their hands. Despite stereotypes in popular literature, most of the people executed were workers (31 percent) and peasants (28 percent), not aristocrats (8 percent) or priests (7 percent). The revolutionary tribunals acquitted many people. The tribunal at Marseilles, for example, acquitted more than 50 percent of the accused and sentenced 31 percent to death. The Parisian tribunal sent many famous figures to the guillotine: Members of the royal family (such as the duke of Orléans), leaders of the Old Regime (Malesherbes), noted scholars (the distinguished chemist Antoine Lavoisier), leading Girondins (Brissot), and feminists (Olympe de Gouges) all died there.

The civil war was especially bloody. Lyons was conquered, with ruthless reprisals, in October 1793; more than sixteen hundred people were executed. The Vendéen counterrevolution dragged on for years with enormous casualties and mass executions of rebels. One ferocious representative of the revolution in the Vendée—Jean-Baptiste Carrier—drowned prisoners in the Loire River by the hundreds, proclaiming, “We shall turn France into a cemetery rather than fail in her regeneration.” A minimum of eighty thousand Vendéens died; some estimates for the civil war put the dead at more than 200,000. (By contrast, total war-related deaths during the American Revolution were fewer than ten thousand; in the American Civil War, more than 600,000.)