

Chapter

1

The French Revolution
and Napoleon 1789–1804

Key questions

- What were the aims and domestic problems of French politicians in the early revolutionary years?
- Why were French governments so unstable up to 1799?
- Why did Napoleon Bonaparte rise to power by 1799?
- What were Napoleon Bonaparte’s domestic aims from 1799 to 1804?

Content summary

- The situation in France before the French Revolution.
- The outbreak of the revolution and the reaction of Louis XVI.
- The counter-revolutionaries and the reasons for the king’s execution in 1793.
- The rule and fall of Robespierre and the aims of the Jacobins.
- The Thermidorian Reaction and the aims and rule of the Directory.
- Napoleon Bonaparte’s rise to power.
- Napoleon’s government of France, including his domestic aims and reforms.
- The formation of the French Empire and Napoleon’s reputation in other countries.

Timeline

May 1774	Accession of Louis XVI
Feb 1787	Assembly of Notables takes place
Jul 1789	Storming of the Bastille during the revolution
Aug 1789	Declaration of the Rights of Man adopted
Jul 1790	Civil Constitution of the Clergy passed
Jun 1791	Louis XVI’s Flight to Varennes
Apr 1792	French Revolutionary Wars begin
Jan 1793	Louis XVI executed; Robespierre and the Jacobins take power
Jul 1794	Robespierre executed; fall of the Jacobins
Nov 1795	Directory established
Nov 1799	End of the Directory; Napoleon becomes first consul
Jul 1801	Concordat with the pope
Mar 1804	Civil Code (Napoleonic Code) comes into force
May 1804	Napoleon becomes ‘Emperor of the French’

Introduction

At its outbreak in 1789, many people believed that the French Revolution marked the dawn of an age of freedom and equality in France. However, the period was characterised by mass killings, intolerance and, eventually, the rise of the powerful **dictator** Napoleon Bonaparte. In fact, those who initiated the revolution did so in the hope of introducing only moderate changes. They did not predict that their efforts would have such an extreme and dramatic conclusion – the execution of the king and the establishment of a **republic** in France.

During the course of the revolution there were widespread changes in just about every sphere of life in France. With the overthrow of the monarchy, the power of the nobility declined. The middle class gained in both wealth and influence, while the peasantry was freed from many of the burdens that it had formerly borne. At the same time, the Roman Catholic Church lost much of its religious monopoly and power.

The French Revolution is generally divided into three distinct stages. The first stage, from 1789 to 1795, witnessed a rapid development from moderate to extreme opposition to the ruling classes. The second stage, up to 1799, marked a return to caution and conservatism. The final stage was the rule of Napoleon, who took the title ‘first consul’ in 1799 and established himself as the country’s leader, promising to fulfil the ideals that had initiated the revolution ten years earlier. Napoleon became emperor in 1804, and although some revolutionary ideals survived, he largely failed to deliver on his promises.

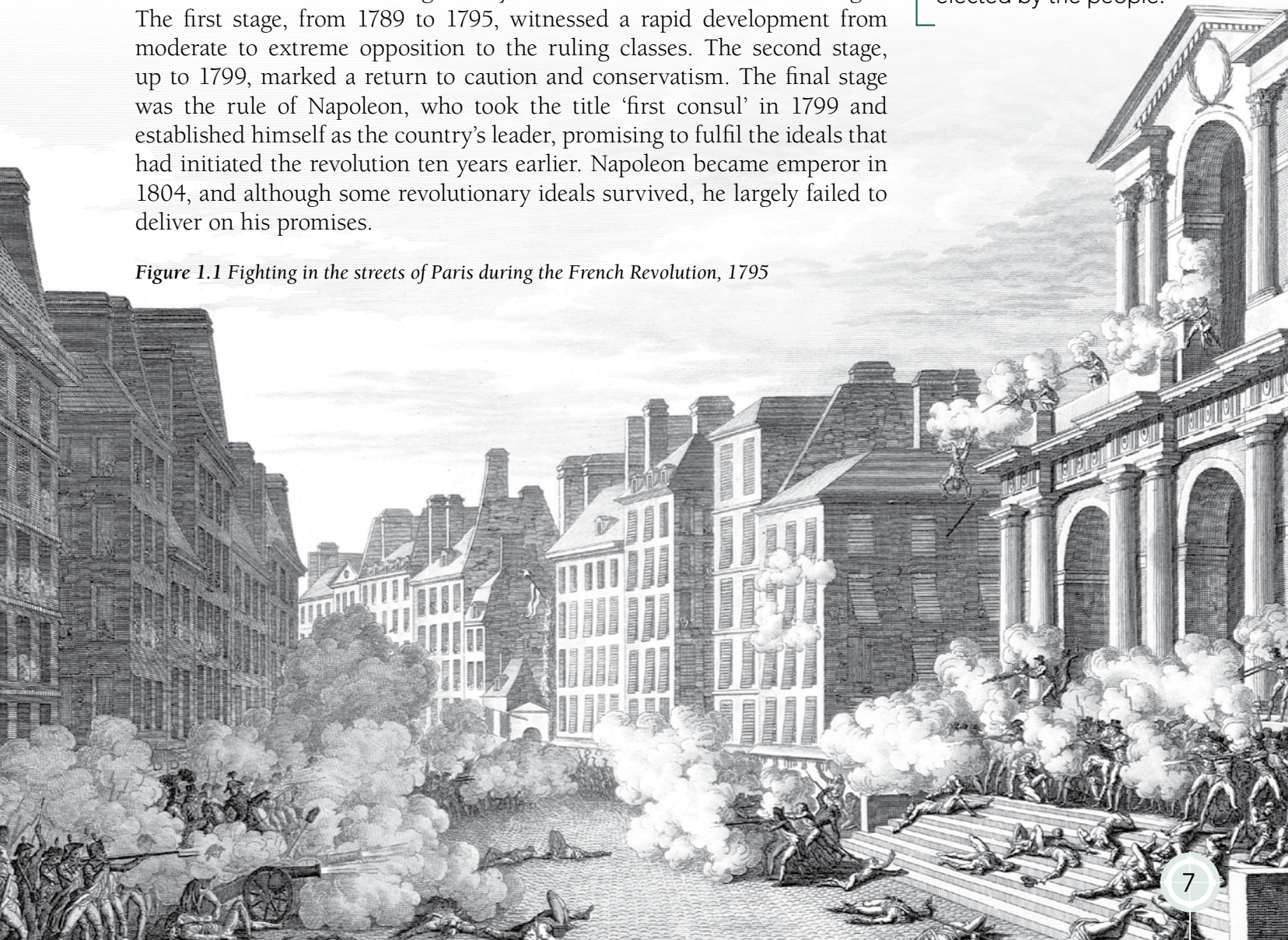
dictator

An absolute ruler who controls a country without democratic institutions.

republic

A form of government in which the head of state is not a monarch, and where supreme power usually lies with a group of citizens elected by the people.

Figure 1.1 Fighting in the streets of Paris during the French Revolution, 1795



Key figures

Louis XIV
(1638–1715)

Known as the ‘Sun King’, Louis XIV ruled France for over 72 years. He believed in the absolute power of the monarchy. His determination to make France the greatest country in Europe led to several major wars.



Louis XV (1710–74)

Louis XV showed little interest in government, instead pursuing his own pleasures. He was strongly influenced by the nobility, and refused to support reform. The historian G. P. Gooch commented that Louis XV’s reputation suffered ‘less from what he did than what he never tried to do’.



The aims and domestic problems of French politicians 1789–91

Long-term causes of the French Revolution

Before the French Revolution, France had been governed by a monarchy for most of its history. Indeed, the country was unique in Europe for the length of the reign of its kings – **Louis XIV** and **Louis XV** had governed France for more than 130 years between them (1643–1774). Their extended rule discouraged reform at a time of great change in the world beyond France.

The power of the king, the nobles and the Church

On the death of Louis XV in 1774, the throne passed to his grandson, **Louis XVI**. The new king was more enlightened than his predecessors had been, but the power and influence of the nobility remained strong, and few reforms could be implemented in the face of their resistance to change.

The king himself maintained considerable authority, and there were few limitations on the power of the monarch. Nobles enjoyed substantial privileges, including low taxes. Only a small middle class existed in France at the time, so the burden of taxes fell most heavily on the peasantry. Almost all French people followed the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, which gave this institution immense influence. The Church used its power to support the monarchy and to oppose any reforms that might challenge the dominance of the *ancien régime*.

Note:

The term *ancien régime* (‘old order’) refers to monarchical governments and their strictly hierarchical societies before the French Revolution (although some historians believe that elements of these regimes continued well after the revolution). It applies particularly to France, and covers the country’s system of government and administration, the structure of its society, the role of its Church, and the nature of its dominant arts and ideas.

Regional divisions and financial troubles

France was a difficult country to govern, as different regions had particular and diverse customs. Most of the population identified themselves more with their region than their country. In addition, there were significant differences in language, culture and law between the north and south of France:

- The language of the south was different from the language of the north.
- Some towns and cities had traditional rights that they guarded jealously, such as appointing local officials and voting for some taxes.
- Laws issued by the king were not applied automatically, but had to be recorded by local institutions throughout France. There were different systems of law in the north and the south.

By 1789, the most urgent problem Louis XVI faced was his country's financial debt. Continuous wars had proved expensive, especially France's intervention on the side of the Americans in their War of Independence (1775–83). Some ministers, including Viscount Calonne and Jacques Necker, tried to introduce reforms that included plans to raise money by imposing higher taxes on the wealthy. However, they were defeated by powerful groups amongst the nobility and Church, who defended their privileges against these reforms. Despite his overall authority, tradition prevented the king from imposing higher taxes without the agreement of these influential institutions.

Like many countries in Europe, France was a largely agricultural economy. Poor harvests over several years resulted in food shortages and rising food prices – a situation that forced many French citizens into poverty and starvation. Discontent grew, and there were increasing calls for change. The apparent indifference of the king and the nobles to the suffering of the lower classes created a tension that contributed significantly to the outbreak of the revolution. The rigid and unsympathetic attitude of the king's wife, **Marie Antoinette**, also added to his increasing unpopularity. The queen was regarded as wantonly extravagant at a time when many people were facing extreme hardship.

The Enlightenment

Despite these entrenched conservative structures, there were some signs of change in France throughout the 18th century – especially with the rise of the Enlightenment. This movement favoured new ideas about government and the rights of citizens, and therefore had significant revolutionary potential. The importance of the Enlightenment as a cause of the French Revolution has been much debated by historians. Some have argued that by undermining institutions such as the Church, the Enlightenment threatened the monarchy and thus played a key role in encouraging rebellion.

Note:

The Enlightenment was an intellectual movement that swept across Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries. Pioneered by thinkers and scientists such as Baruch Spinoza (1632–77), John Locke (1632–1704), Pierre Bayle (1647–1706), Isaac Newton (1643–1727) and Voltaire (1694–1778), the Enlightenment sought to place reason and science at the centre of human endeavour, pitting itself against religious irrationalism and superstition.

Key figures

Louis XVI (1754–93)

Louis XVI was a religious man with a reputation as a good husband and father. However, he was a weak and indecisive king. After the outbreak of the revolution, Louis accepted reforms only reluctantly, and his policies were confused. He was executed in January 1793.



Marie Antoinette (1755–93)

Marie Antoinette was the daughter of the Empress of Austria. Her marriage to the king was unpopular in France. When the French Revolution broke out, the queen pressed her husband to resist reform. She was executed in 1793, a few months after Louis XVI.



However, other historians have dismissed this as a romantic view, believing that practical issues such as taxation and the poor condition of the economy were the most significant causes of the revolution.

Short-term causes of the French Revolution

The main reason for the start of the revolution in 1789 was the refusal of the nobility to accept reforms that would interfere with their traditional privileges. In particular, there was friction over the French tax system, which imposed the heaviest taxes on the middle and working classes, while the upper classes and the nobility benefited from numerous tax exemptions and advantages. At a time when the French state was nearing bankruptcy from its involvement in expensive wars, this provoked widespread hostility.

In an effort to address the country's financial problems, Louis XVI agreed to call a meeting of the Estates General. This advisory assembly comprised representatives from the three classes, or 'estates', into which society was traditionally divided:

- **The First Estate:** the Church. Members in the Estates General were not ordinary clergy, but came from the upper levels of the Church hierarchy. These representatives were chosen informally by other clergy rather than being officially elected.
- **The Second Estate:** the nobility. Members of the Estates General were informally elected. A few nobles in the assembly were willing to embrace reform, but the majority resisted change.
- **The Third Estate:** everyone else. Although the majority of the Third Estate was made up of peasants, members of the Estates General were overwhelmingly from the middle class. Their demands therefore represented the interests of the middle class rather than the peasantry. The Third Estate sought change, but it did not aim to bring about revolution.

The king's decision to convene the Estates General in 1789 was a desperate measure. The assembly had last been called in 1614, and few people really understood either its procedures or the extent of its powers. Typically, each estate had the same number of votes in the Estates General. This meant

that the Church and the nobility – traditional allies – could join forces to outvote the Third Estate and block any suggestion of reform. However, in 1789, the First Estate comprised 10,000 clergy and the Second Estate was made up of 400,000 nobles, while the Third Estate represented 25 million people. As such, the Third Estate demanded that voting should more fairly reflect the membership of the different classes. After three months of disputes, the Third Estate was eventually granted double its number of representatives in the Estates General, and the meeting began in May 1789.

Note:

Although some members of the Third Estate were convinced to participate in the Estates General after being granted double representation at the meeting, this turned out to be irrelevant. When it came to voting, the king upheld the traditional way that votes were counted – that is, the collective vote of each estate carried equal weight.

The start of the revolution

Louis XVI had ordered each of the three Estates to draw up a list of its grievances (called *cahiers*), which would be presented to the king and discussed at the meeting. All three groups agreed on certain matters, including the need for a constitution, liberty of the press and an end to **internal trade barriers**. However, there were many more issues on which they could not agree. Most importantly, the First and Second Estates refused to surrender their taxation privileges. The king himself proved his lack of leadership ability during the discussions, offering weak support to the First and Second Estates, but failing to take any firm decisions or enforce his own will. It quickly became clear that the situation was deadlocked.

internal trade barriers
Restrictions imposed by a government on the exchange of goods and services within a particular country.

Figure 1.2 A painting showing the opening of the meeting of the Estates General in 1789



The National Assembly and the Tennis Court Oath

As a result of this impasse, representatives of the Third Estate decided to break away from the Estates General and form an independent assembly that would more fairly address the demands of the lower classes. Some clergy and nobles who favoured reform also joined this group, which called itself the National Constituent Assembly.

Although the National Assembly claimed to be working in favour of the king as well as the people, Louis XVI was angered by what he perceived to be a challenge to his royal authority. Urged on by his family and other advisors, on 19 June 1789 the king ordered that the hall in which the Assembly met should be locked. Armed guards were posted at the door and members were denied entry. Louis resolved to reassert his power by overturning the decisions made by the Assembly and dictating the few reforms that would be implemented.

Note:

The National Constituent Assembly was formed on 9 July 1789. It was dissolved just two years later, in September 1791. The group is alternatively referred to as the Constituent Assembly or the National Assembly.

Key figure

Honoré Gabriel Riqueti, Count of Mirabeau (1749–91)

Mirabeau was born into the nobility, but was disowned by his family after several scandals in his youth. He was a leader of the National Assembly, and fought for the rights of the lower classes. However, his revolutionary ideals were moderate and he favoured a constitutional monarchy (in which the king's powers would be limited). After the revolution broke out, he secretly acted as advisor to Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette – a fact that destroyed his reputation among the French people when it became known after his death in 1791.

Note:

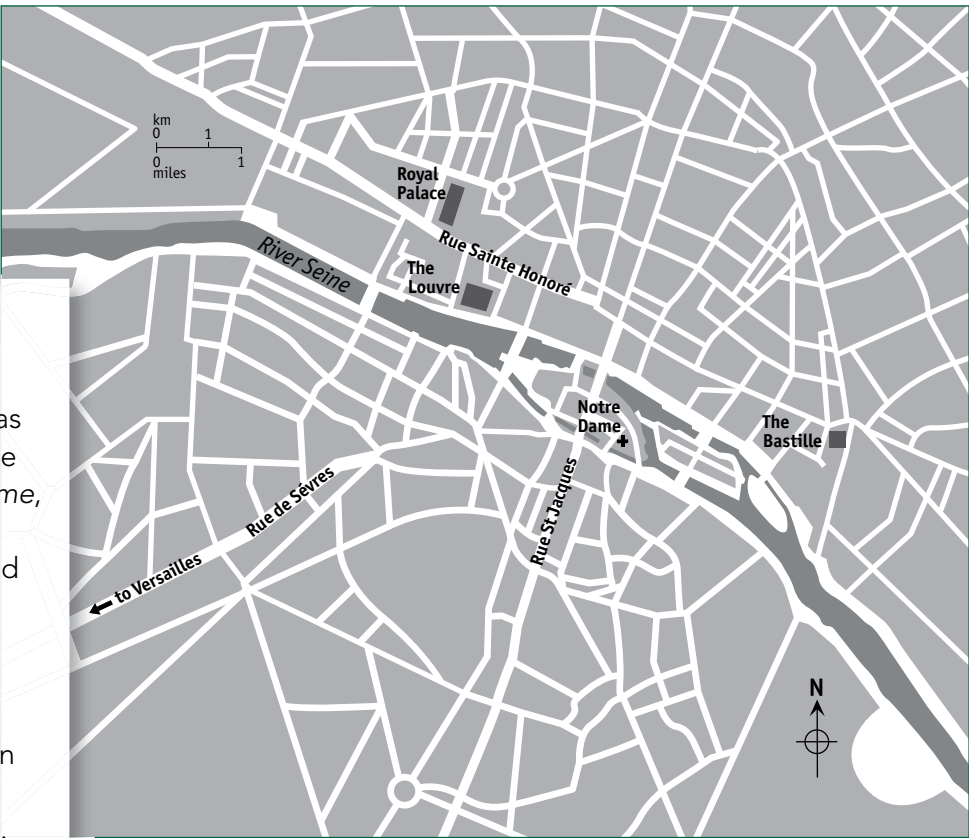
The Bastille was a fortress and prison in Paris, and was considered a symbol of the tyranny of the *ancien régime*, although at the time of its 'storming' in 1789 it housed only seven prisoners and was more important as a weapons and ammunition store. Bastille Day is still remembered every year on 14 July – a national day of celebration for the French.

Turned away from their meeting-place, members of the Assembly instead convened at a tennis court in the Saint-Louis district of Versailles on 20 June. There, 576 members swore an oath not to disperse until a new constitution for France had been established. The 'Tennis Court Oath', as it became known, was a significant moment in the history of the French Revolution. It was the first act of defiance against the king – and the first demonstration that decisions about the government of the country could be made by the people. Such defiance was exemplified by **Honoré Gabriel Riqueti, Count of Mirabeau**, a nobleman who supported the cause of the Third Estate and joined the National Assembly. Mirabeau declared: 'We shall not stir from our places save at the point of a bayonet.'

The storming of the Bastille

There were fears that Louis XVI would bring in the army to crush this unofficial gathering of the National Assembly. As a result, many French citizens flocked to the centre of Paris to show support for this new political movement that defended the rights of the people. Violence broke out and, on 14 July 1789, one of the first major actions of the revolution took place when crowds in Paris stormed the Bastille in an attempt to seize the guns and ammunition being stored there, to use against the king's soldiers. All those defending the building were killed.

Figure 1.3 A map of Paris in 1789



The fighting grew steadily more intense. The citizens had become hardened to the gunfire. From all directions they clambered onto the roof of the Bastille or broke into the rooms. As soon as an enemy appeared among the turrets on the tower, he was fixed in the sights of a hundred guns and mown down in an instant. Meanwhile cannon fire was hurriedly directed against the inner drawbridge, which it pierced. In vain did the cannon on the tower reply, for most people were sheltered from it. People bravely faced death and every danger. Women, in their eagerness, helped us to the utmost; even the children ran here and there picking up the bullets. And so the Bastille fell and the governor, De Launey, was captured. Blessed liberty has at last been introduced into this place of horrors, this frightful refuge of monstrous despotism. De Launey was struck by a thousand blows, his head was cut off and hoisted on the end of a pike with blood streaming down all sides. The other officers were killed. This glorious day must amaze our enemies, and finally bring in for us the triumph of justice and liberty. In the evening, there were celebrations.

An extract from a French newspaper describing the fall of the Bastille, 14 July 1789.

Figure 1.4 The capture of the Bastille fortress on 14 July 1789



Note:

The *sans-culottes* were named after the type of clothes common to the workers and craftsmen in French cities, especially Paris. They wore plain trousers rather than expensive knee-breeches (*culottes*), which were the fashion among the wealthier classes.

One of the most radical groups in Paris at the start of (and indeed throughout) the revolution were the so-called *sans-culottes*. These working-class revolutionaries demanded democracy and equality, and were willing to resort to violence to achieve their aims. Amidst rumours that the king would overthrow the revolution, panic spread from Paris to the provinces and peasants began to riot. They seized property from landlords and stole food from stores; records with lists of services and taxes to be paid by the peasants were also destroyed. As the revolution gained momentum across France, some nobles – the *émigrés* (emigrants) – fled abroad to try to persuade other European monarchies to lend support in putting down the rebellion.

The August Decrees and the Declaration of the Rights of Man

feudalism
A system of social organisation that prevailed in Europe between the 9th and 15th centuries, but which persisted in some parts of the continent until the 19th century. In essence, feudalism relied on people holding land in return for service or labour to a wealthy landowner, placing them in a position of servitude.

The following month, the National Assembly issued the August Decrees – a series of new laws that effectively brought about the end of **feudalism** in France and granted many more rights to peasants and workers. The nobility agreed to abolish compulsory service by peasants, including unpaid work to repair roads, and to abandon the taxes that peasants usually had to pay their landlords at harvest time. The decrees also abolished law courts run by the nobility. In addition, the Church gave up the right to collect payments from the rest of the population, which had previously added greatly to its wealth.

On 26 August 1789, the Assembly issued the Declaration of the Rights of Man. This document was based on the American Declaration of Independence and was the first step in establishing a constitution for France. It stated that:

- all men were born free and had the rights of equality, liberty, security and property
- imprisonment without trial would be banned
- taxation was to be fairly apportioned to all people based on their wealth
- sovereignty lay with the people; no individual or group should be allowed to make decisions that went against the will of the people.

Louis XVI believed that the problems were temporary, but accepted the changes to prevent further disorder. However, unrest continued. A march headed by several thousand women went to Versailles and forced the royal family to return to Paris. Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette were greeted with cheers on their return, but the king now had to acknowledge formally the reforms introduced by the Assembly. A foreign ambassador reported that France was ruled by the Paris mob.

The situation by the end of 1789

The counter-revolutionaries (the people who opposed the revolution) included the king and the rest of the royal family, as well as almost all the nobility and the higher clergy. Outside France, several foreign governments

also opposed the revolution – they were afraid that if it succeeded there, rebellion might break out in their own countries. Paris was the centre of revolutionary enthusiasm, and although the movement quickly gained a following in other parts of the country, support was not universal among the lower classes. In fact, in strongly Catholic regions such as Brittany and the Vendée in the far west, many people remained loyal to the Catholic king.

Even amongst the counter-revolutionaries there were divisions. The most hardline of them thought that the king should refuse to accept any changes to the way France was governed, and were determined to restore the *ancien régime* (see page 8) as swiftly as possible. More moderate counter-revolutionaries felt that certain reforms were reasonable and believed that the king should accept some limits on his power. However, they could not agree on the extent of these changes. The counter-revolutionaries looked to the king for leadership, but Louis was indecisive and failed to take a firm stand. As a result, those who opposed the revolution were not well-organised and had no clear programme of action for suppressing the rebellion and regaining control.

The revolutionaries also lacked strong leadership and a clear agenda for reform. The lower classes had many grievances against the *ancien régime*, but their remedies for the situation were vague at best. The people of France demanded equality, liberty, security and land ownership, but offered no detail about exactly what this meant or how it should be implemented. For some months after the royal family was brought to Paris from Versailles, the revolution moved uncertainly.

The situation required someone to act as an intermediary between the king and the revolutionaries. At first it seemed that the Count of Mirabeau (see page 12) might suit this role, but although Mirabeau was popular with the people, the king and his court distrusted him. Another moderate nobleman, **Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de Lafayette**, was suggested, but he expressed little enthusiasm for representing the demands of the more radical revolutionaries. Consequently, little progress was made by either side in the first months of the revolution.

The Civil Constitution 1790

As a symbol of the *ancien régime*, the Church naturally became a target for reformers. Some monasteries were dissolved and the Church's right to raise taxes was abolished, but these reforms were not controversial and leading clergy did not protest or appeal to the pope for support. However, in July 1790, the Assembly introduced a much more radical law – the Civil Constitution of the Clergy:

- The pope was deprived of his authority over the Church in France. He could no longer appoint archbishops and bishops (or, as a consequence, any clergy that served under them). Instead, bishops and parish clergy were to be elected by state officials.

Key figure

Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de Lafayette (1757–1834)

Lafayette was a French nobleman. He led the French soldiers who supported the American War of Independence, and returned as a national hero. When the French Revolution broke out, he favoured moderate reform and helped draw up the Declaration of the Rights of Man. However, he later came into conflict with the more radical revolutionaries, was arrested and spent five years in prison. Lafayette was released when Napoleon came to power.

