
The Modern World



Session 3: The French Revolution
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Review of Session 2: The Enlightenment

In this session:

- What were the factors leading to the French Revolution?
- What form did the Revolution take?
- What have been the historiographical trends in interpreting the French Revolution?

What was the French Revolution?

- Doyle (2001): not a 'single event' –a 'series of developments, bewildering to most contemporaries, which stretched over a number of years'.
- Sustained period of uncertainty, disorder and conflict, reverberating beyond France.



Impact of C18th conflict

C18th – France had fought 3 large-scale wars.

Self-conception as a great European power challenged

Naval rivalry with Britain - Anglo-French wars 1740s-1750s.

Seven Years War (1756-63)

Peace of Paris 1763.

War left France burdened with debt – servicing debt absorbed 60% of tax revenues.

Impact of C18th conflict

1770s – US independence – French assistance in 1778.

Hoped-for advantages did not materialise

War paid for by new loans rather than increasing taxation.

Massive borrowing continued into peacetime.

By 1786, decline in tax revenues and burden of war loans → financial crisis.

The ancien régime

- Absolute monarchy and the divine right to rule.
- Royal lifestyle perceived as extravagant and distant.
- State represented by the *Intendants* – unpopular, authoritarian.

The ancien régime

- Fiscal and administrative work of *intendants* often obstructed by courts of law.
- 13 *parlements* – protested and pointed out flaws in French royal legislation.
- In C18th, increasingly printed and published – public debate over monarchical government.
- Venality – sale of public office (judiciary and other public offices)
- 1771: Maupeou's attack on the *parlements* – Maupeou dismissed.
- Short term success – though some provincial *parlements* remained obstructive, *parlement* of Paris largely cooperative for the next 12 years.



The ancien régime

- Nobility and Church – tax exemptions. Burden of taxation fell on those least able to pay.
- *Parlements*' resistance to tax changes popular.
- Late 1770s – US war sustained without substantial new taxation. Role of Necker and 'economies' at court.
- Economies didn't pay directly for war – intended to boost French credit and borrowing ability.
- 1781 – Necker published statement of royal accounts, showed a surplus – further undermined any calls for increased taxation.
- Financial history of the monarchy 1720-1788 - a struggle to avoid bankruptcy (Doyle, 2001).



The ancien régime

- Influence of 'Physiocratic' ideas on economic policy – application of 'natural laws' to agricultural production.
- Called for tax reform and commercial liberalisation.
- Difficult to implement – feudal dues were property rights, and tithes paid parish priests.
- Opposition of commercial and industrial classes.
- Poorest bore the brunt of experiments from 1760s to deregulate grain trade.
- Poor harvests and high prices → food shortages and breakdown of public order.

The ancien régime

- Disillusionment with the church – extreme wealth.
- Calls for church reform from 1720s.
- Mid-century persecution of dissident priests (Jansenists)
- 1760s expulsion of the Jesuits – educational debate and experiment.
- Church calls for censorship, attempts at internal reform.
- ‘The Church was a victim of its own success’ (Doyle, 2001) – clerical education had increased literacy from around 20% to around 33% of population.
- Increased demand for printed materials → increased government censorship, as well as attempts by royal court to influence public opinion.

The ancien régime

- French assistance in US War of Independence – questions in France: ‘no taxation without representation’?
- 1771, Maupeou’s attack on *parlements* led to calls for meeting of the Estates-General, last convened 1614.
- Others called for representative institutions to involve taxpayers in administration.
- Necker – began introducing ‘provincial administrations’. Only 2 established before his resignation.
- Monarchy becoming less absolute under Louis XVI – recognition of importance of consent, cooperation, and public opinion.

The ancien régime

- Judiciary – magistrates recruited by heredity or purchase, not competence.
- Judiciary considered overstaffed, underemployed, slow, and expensive.
- Miscarriages of justice – unfairness of system.
- Lack of standard application of law – codification attempts had faltered by 1670s.

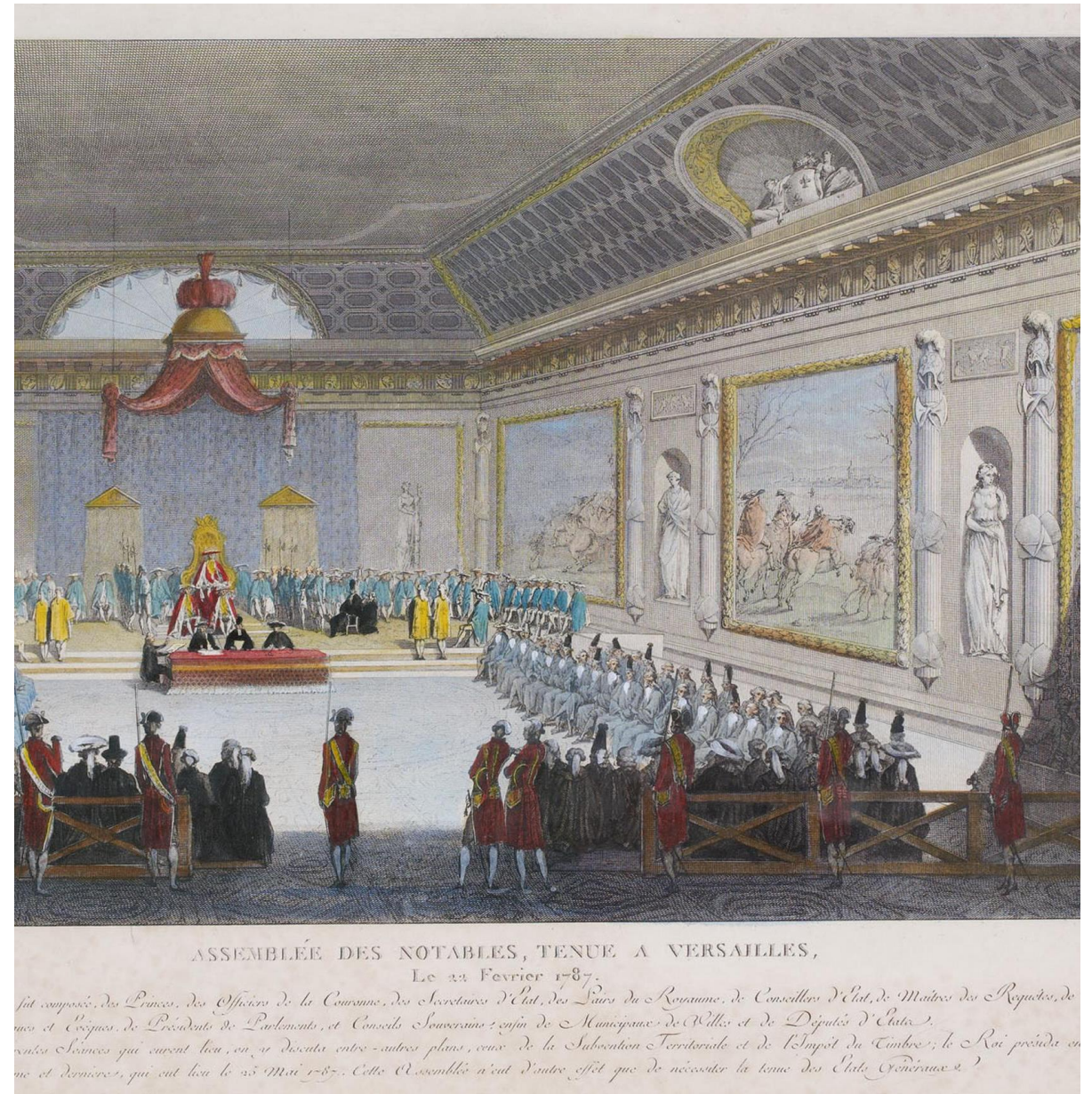
Calonne and the Assembly of Notables

- Calonne appointed finance minister 1783. Attempts to float new loans resisted by Paris *parlement*.
- 20 August 1786 – Calonne's plan for reform: uniform land tax with no exemptions; elected provincial administrations; economic stimulation
- None of these measures expected to be immediately beneficial – more borrowing needed until effects were felt.
- Calonne hoped to boost confidence in reforms through endorsement of Assembly of Notables – convened February 1787.



Calonne and the Assembly of Notables

- Few Notables supported Calonne's reforms.
- Calonne dismissed by Louis XVI.
- Brienne proposes amended version – also unsuccessful - Louis XVI rejected permanent commission to audit royal accounts.
- Growing numbers of the Assembly of Notables called for convening the Estates-General – also supported by crowds gathering in streets.
- Assembly dissolved 25 May 1787.



Bankruptcy

- Mid-September 1787, Dutch Republic invaded by Prussia.
- French humiliation - could not keep promise to intervene.
- May 1788, unpopular attempts to remodel parlements and reduce their powers.
- August 1788 – bankruptcy and resignation of Brienne.
- Necker returned to office, announced meeting of Estates-General in 1789.



Social issues

- July 1788 - hailstorm across northern France – destroyed most of the harvest.
- Low food reserves after Calonne authorised free export of grain in 1787 – economic hardship.
- Escalating bread prices, falling demand for other goods. Widespread unemployment as food prices soared.
- Unusually cold winter – immobilised mills, followed by flooding – increased food prices more.

The Estates-General

- Questions of how Estates-General would vote.
- 1614 – 3 orders: clergy, nobility, ‘third estate’. Voted by order.
- ‘Committee of thirty’ – Parisians, mostly nobles, sought to influence public opinion against this, produced pamphlets.
- Reconvened Assembly of Notables supported calls for the forms of 1614
- Abbé Sieyès, *What is the Third Estate?*
- Necker announced that number of third-estate deputies would be doubled – but little impact unless voting by head.
- Drafting of *Cahiers* (grievance lists)

QU'EST-CE QUE LE TIERS-ÉTAT ?

LE plan de cet Ecrit est assez simple. Nous avons trois questions à nous faire.

1°. Qu'est-ce que le Tiers-Etat ? TOUT.

2°. Qu'a-t-il été jusqu'à présent dans l'ordre politique ? RIEN.

3°. Que demande-t-il ? A devenir QUELQUE CHOSE.

On va voir si les réponses sont justes. Nous examinerons ensuite les moyens que l'on a essayés, & ceux que l'on doit prendre, afin que le Tiers-Etat devienne, en effet, *quelque chose*. Ainsi nous dirons :

4°. Ce que les Ministres ont tenté, & ce que les Privilégiés eux-mêmes proposent en sa faveur.

5°. Ce qu'on auroit dû faire.

6°. Enfin, ce qui reste à faire au Tiers pour prendre la place qui lui est due.

Sieyès, *What is the Third Estate?*

- Take a look at the extracts provided
- How does Sieyès believe society should be organised?
- What does Sieyès say about the 'Third Estate'?
- What impact do you think this pamphlet would have had?



From Estates-General to National Assembly

- 5 May 1789 - Estates-General met at Versailles
- Nobility and clergy refused to vote per-head
- 10 June 1789, Sieyès proposed third estate should begin proceedings unilaterally
- Sieyès on 17 June 1789 proposed name of National Assembly.
- New National Assembly immediately decreed cancellation then re-authorisation of all taxes
- Louis XVI declared he would hold Royal Session to promulgate his own programme.
- 20 June 1789 – the ‘Tennis Court Oath’.

The National Assembly



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- 23 June, Royal Session - Louis XVI quashed all the claims made 10-17 June, instructed orders to reconvene separately.
 - Nobles and clerics joined the National Assembly.
 - 26 June, regiments ordered to converge on Versailles.
 - Louis refused calls by Assembly to withdraw.
 - Suspicion and fear grows, members of Paris garrison of French guards began to desert.
 - 14 July: Storming of the Bastille.

The National Constituent Assembly



- Spread to rural areas.
- Abolition of feudal dues, venal offices, and tithes. Equality of taxation.
- 'Much of the fabric of French social life had been destroyed in just a few hours' (Doyle, 2001).
- Rural disorder lessened, Assembly worked on constitution.
- 26 August 1789 – Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen.
- Principles of a constitutional monarchy outlined – king granted limited veto powers over new laws, Louis XVI resistant.
- March of women on Versailles, Royal Family escorted back to Paris on 6 October 1789.

The Church and the Revolution

- Constitution restricted political rights to substantial taxpayers, promised compensation to those affected by reforms.
- Could not meet costs by taxation – targeted Church wealth.
- 2 November 1789, church land and endowments placed ‘at the disposal of the nation’, to be sold to support issue of *assignats* (state bonds)
- Civil equality for Protestants
- Refused in April 1890 to declare Catholicism the state religion.

The Church and the Revolution



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- Reform of Church in accordance with revolutionary principles.
 - July 1790: Civil Constitution of the Clergy
 - November 1790, all clergy required to take oath of obedience, or be ineligible for payment.
 - Only about 50% of clergy complied, and many retracted in Spring 1791 when Pope denounced the Civil Constitution.

The Flight to Varennes



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- Louis XVI avoiding receiving the sacraments from clergy who had accepted the oath – considered a symbol of loyalty to revolution.
 - Popular hostility and demonstrations around the Tuileries Palace.
 - Royal family attempted escape 20 June 1791, captured at Varennes.
 - Distrust of monarchy increased
 - Efforts to hurriedly complete an acceptable constitution.
 - Hurried changes to exclude religious clauses, and limit freedom of press and political clubs.
 - Louis XVI accepts Constitution.
 - 30 September 1791, Constituent Assembly came to an end – replaced by Legislative Assembly.

Increasing tensions

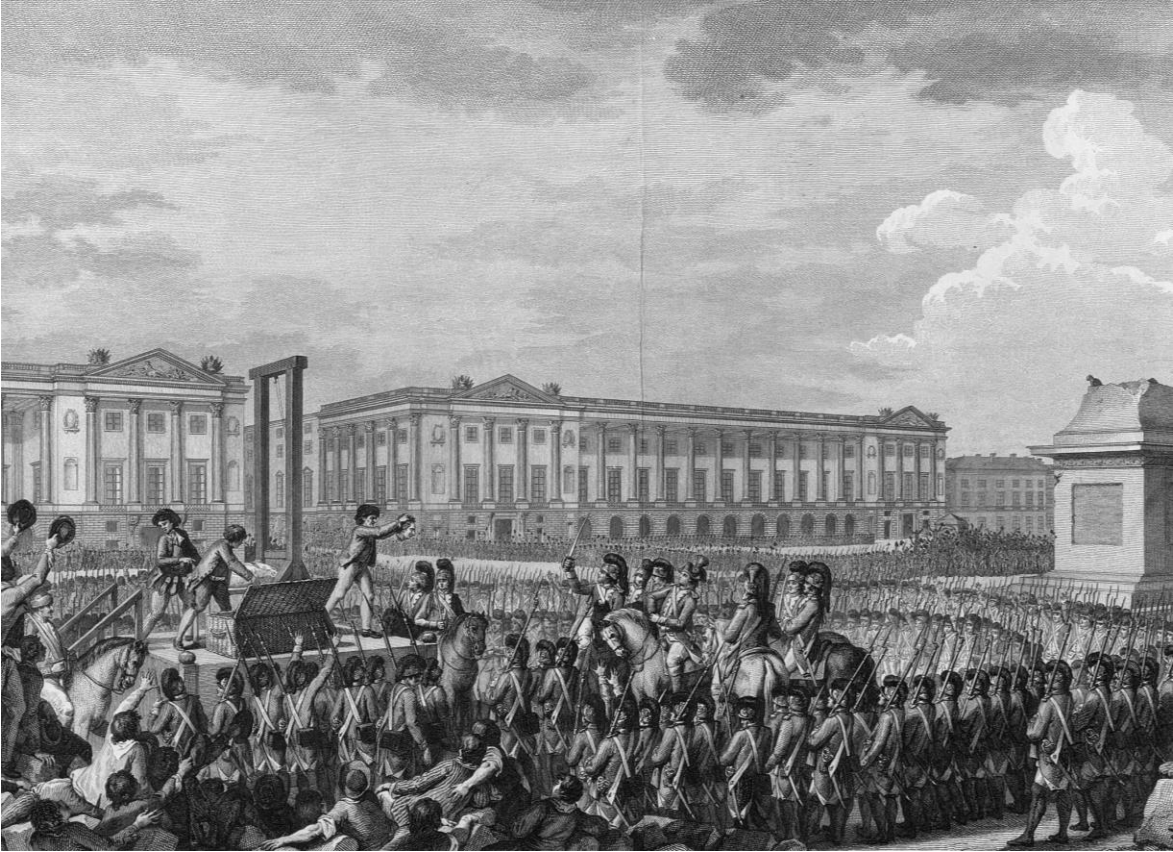
- Flight to Varennes alarmed foreign monarchies.
- Declaration of Pillnitz, 27 August 1791
- Former army officers amassing at French border
- Concern increased by Haitian revolution
- Louis declared war 20 April 1792.

War



- Polarisation of politics.
- Louis XVI continued to veto laws against refractory priests – mobbed in palace on 20 June by the *sansculottes*.
- Poor performance in war, threats of Prussian invasion
- Troops reinforced by *fédérés*
- Prussian commander threatened to destroy Paris if Louis XVI harmed
- 10 August: *Sansculottes* and *fédérés* attacked royal palace.
- Assembly voted to suspend the monarchy and convoke a new body, elected by manhood suffrage
- Prussians invaded France → emergency powers introduced by Provisional Executive Council, thousands of arrests.
- ‘The September Massacres’.

The end of the monarchy



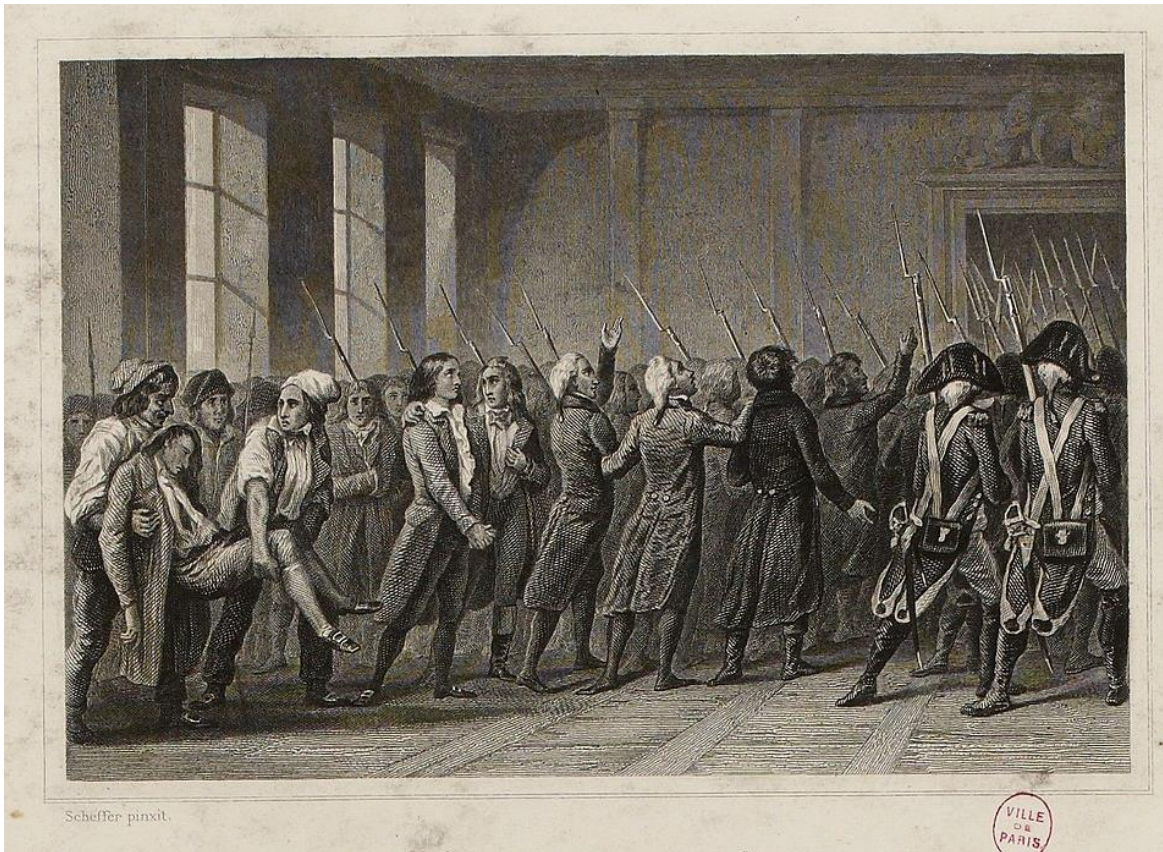
- French defeated Prussians at Valmy on 20 September. 6 months of military success.
- 21 September – Convention meets, 22 September proclaims the Republic.
- ‘Louis the Last’ – tried December 1792. Found guilty.
- Sentence contentious – death penalty approved by one vote.
- 21 January 1793, Louis XVI executed.

The coming of 'The Terror'



- 1 February 1793: Britain and Dutch Republic, Spain, and several Italian states joined war against France.
- Resistance to conscription in western France.
- 11 March: Civil war began in the Vendée – ‘Catholic and Royal Army’ organised to restore the monarchy.
- War begins to go badly – French driven out of the Rhineland and Belgium.

The coming of 'The Terror'



- Crisis – exacerbated conflicts within the Convention.
- Girondins vs Montagnards.
- 29 Girondins arrested on 2 June 1793.

The coming of 'The Terror'



- Exacerbation of crisis – ‘Federalist Revolt’ in several cities including Marseille, Bordeaux, and Lyon.
- Almost 14,000 sentenced to death by special courts over Autumn and Winter 1793, most killed by the guillotine (introduced April 1792).
- *Sansculottes* mass demonstrations in favour of terror.
- Emergency powers
- October 1793: Girondins and Marie-Antoinette guillotined.



The coming of 'The Terror'

- Suppression of religion
- Hébertists – attempted to silence critics of terror through a coup, but outmanoeuvred by the Committee of Public Safety, and guillotined.
- 2000 victims condemned by the Paris Revolutionary tribunals by July 1793.
- June 1794: Law of 22 prairial

The fall of Robespierre

- General state of fear.
- Group of deputies began to plot against Robespierre – arrested and guillotined on 28 July (9 thermidor in the new Revolutionary Calendar)
- ‘The Terror’ ended with his execution.

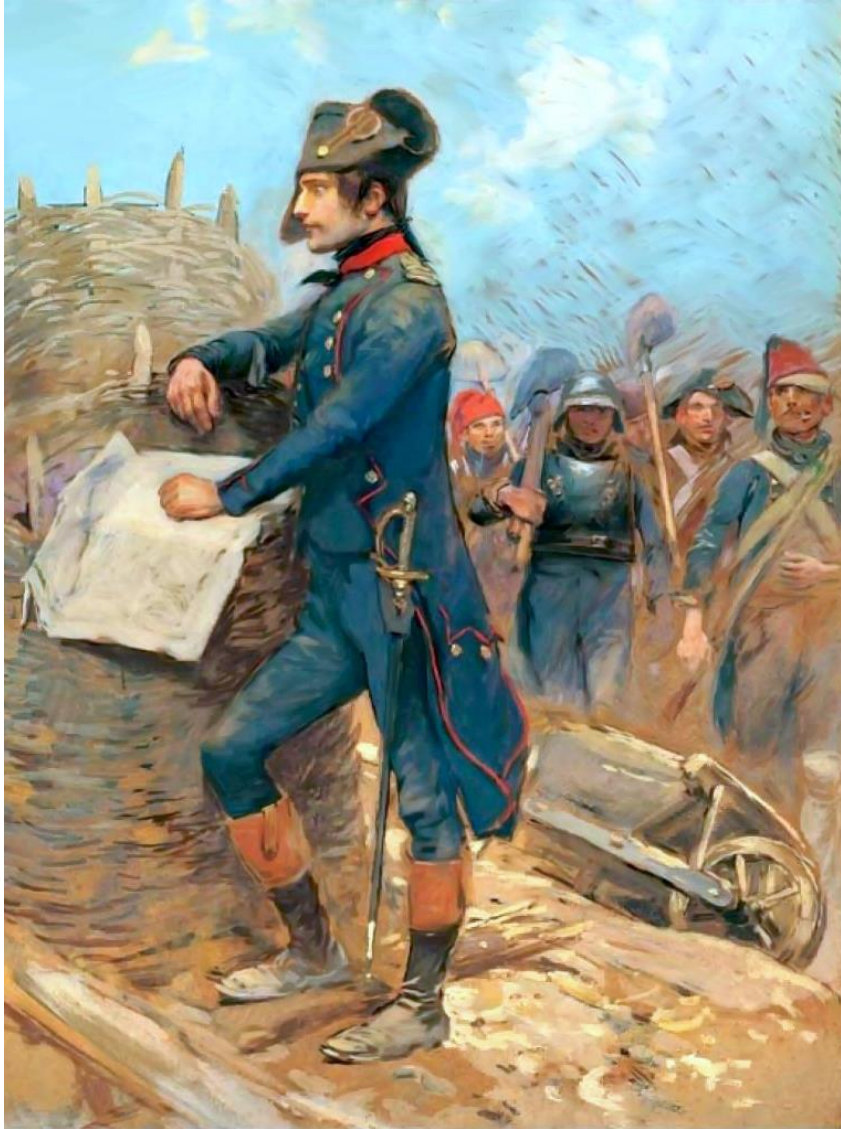


The Thermidoreans

- Thermidoreans – emptied prisons, closed the Jacobin club, abandoned economic controls.
- Sought to recover idealism of the early revolution – conciliation with Catholics and Royalists.
- Discussions of restoring monarchy in Spring 1795 - death of 'Louis XVII' in June 1795.
- July 1795, Count de Provence declares his own succession
- Attempted invasion of Brittany suppressed at Quiberon.
- Summer 1795, new constitution.
- Royalists – protest at the lack of free elections, dispersed by Bonaparte on 5 October 1795.

The Directory

- Success in war – annexation of Belgium, invasion of Dutch Republic. Peace with Prussia and Spain.
- By end of 1795, only Austria and Britain left in war – plans to strike Austria from Germany and Italy.
- Bonaparte drove Austrians out of Italy, peace talks at Leoben.
- Concessions made to persecuted Jacobins, released from prison.
- ‘Conspiracy of equals’ thwarted.
- Swing to the right at 1797 elections.
- Coup of fructidor (September 1797).
- October 1797 – peace with Austria, establishment of Cisalpine Republic.
- Renewed action against priests and nobles by Directory.



Bonaparte

- Britain remained in war alone
- Bonaparte expedition to Egypt
- Revolt against the Cisalpine Republic
- Pope taken prisoner
- Peasant uprising in Belgian territories Oct 1798.
- Sieyès became member of the Directory, sought cooperation of a general to mount coup – Napoleon returned from Egypt.
- Legislative Councils dissolved November 1799

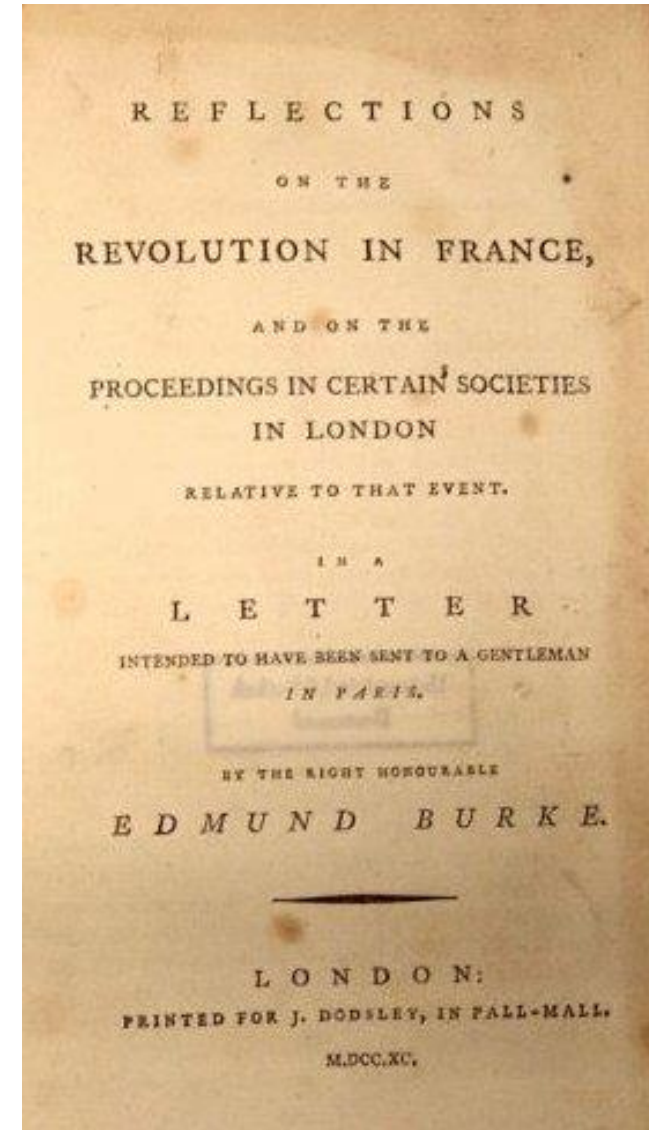
Bonaparte



- New constitution gave Bonaparte almost unlimited powers as First Consul of the Republic.
- ‘The revolution is established on the principles with which it began, it is over’.
- Continental war ended 1801, peace with British at Amiens 1802.
- Napoleon crowned himself in 1804.

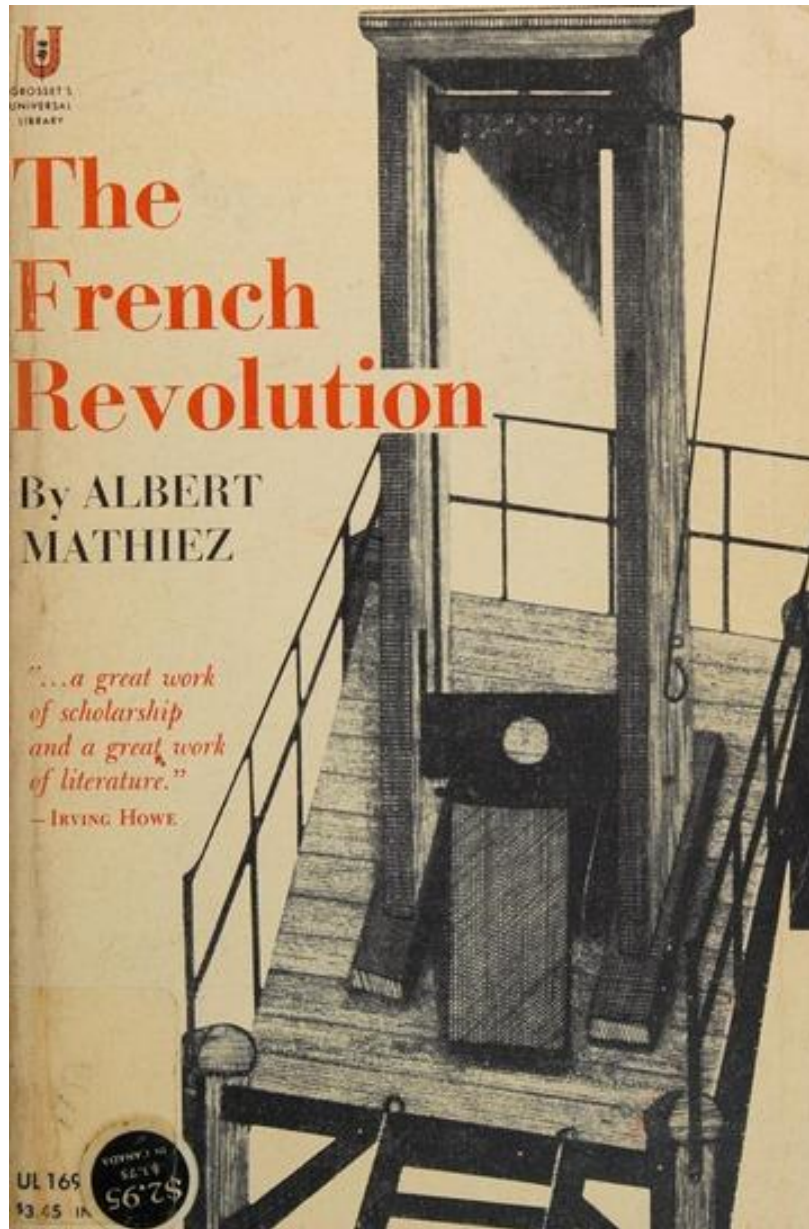
Early interpretations

- Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) – rejected comparisons with ‘Glorious Revolution’ 1688 and American Revolution of 1770s. Predicted anarchy and terror.
- Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man* (1791) – answer to Burke, defends revolution as attack on despotism. Break from the past, Enlightenment values.



Early interpretations

- Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution: A History* (1837) – mindless, vengeful chaos, though suggested the old regime deserved its fate for oppression of the hungry masses.
- Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution* (1856) – Revolution made little difference, centralised feudal control replaced with centralised aristocratic control. Questioned how far revolution introduced liberty.
- Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) – influenced by Burke (contrasting violent Paris and safe London) but also by Carlyle – portrays a cruel old order, arbitrary imprisonment, poverty, social resentment.
- Jean Jaurès, *A Socialist History of the French Revolution* (1901) – emphasis on economic and social dimensions, introduced Marxist analysis. Overthrow of feudal nobility by emerging capitalist bourgeoisie.



‘Classic’ historiography

- History of Revolution as written in France in C20th ‘more a matter of commemoration than scholarly analysis’ (Doyle, 2001)
- Dominated by communist historians, Marxist analysis.
- Revolution as force for progress
- Product and vindication of Enlightenment ideals
- Sought to liberate humanity as a whole from superstition, prejudice, inequalities.
- Mathiez (1922-24) – French revolution as class struggle, first stage of proletarian advance. ‘The Terror’ presented as a matter of national defence, a cruel necessity. Precursor to 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia.
- French historiography dominated until 1960s by the ‘Society of Robespierist Studies’ founded by Mathiez.



Revisionism

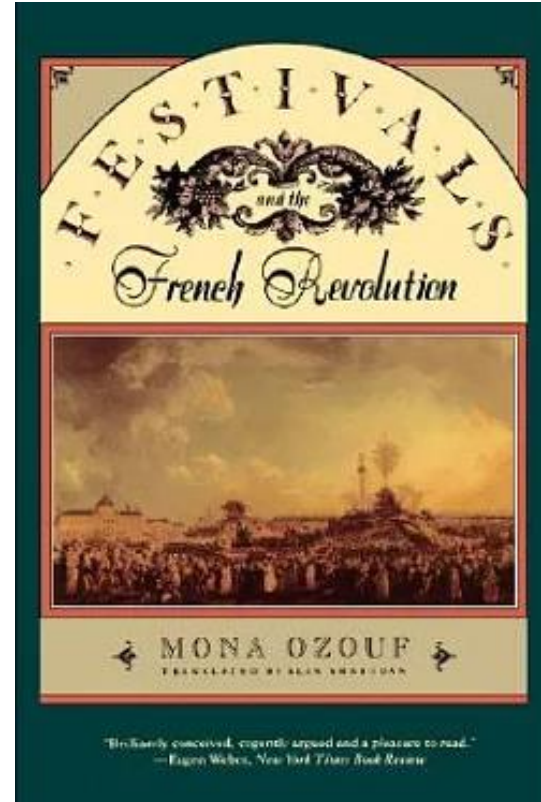
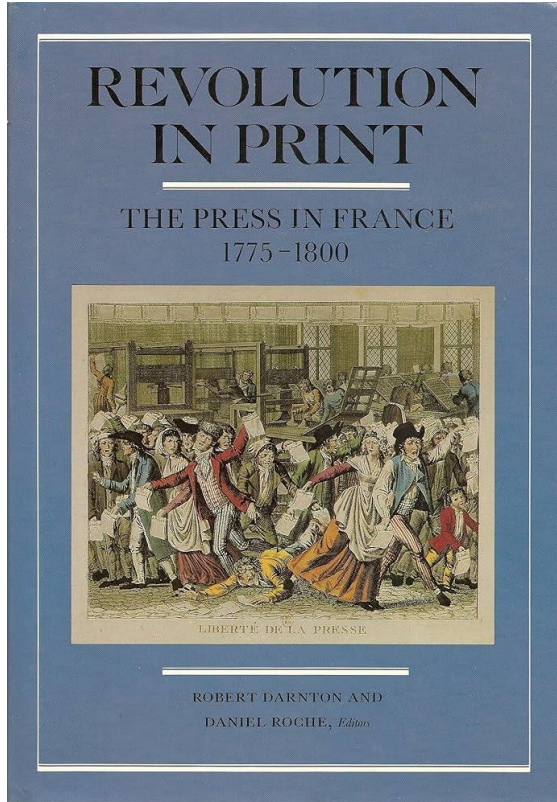
- Began earlier in Anglophone world than in France – 1950s.
- Cold War context – end of WWII, Western democracies threatened by Marxism.
- Cobban (1955) and Taylor (1967): Revolutionaries of 1789 were not representatives of capitalism, emerging bourgeoisie, but landowners. Not a proletarian revolution.
- Undermining the Marxist orthodoxy.
- Empirical approaches, new evidence undermining sweeping social and economic narratives. More contingent and accidental than deliberate.



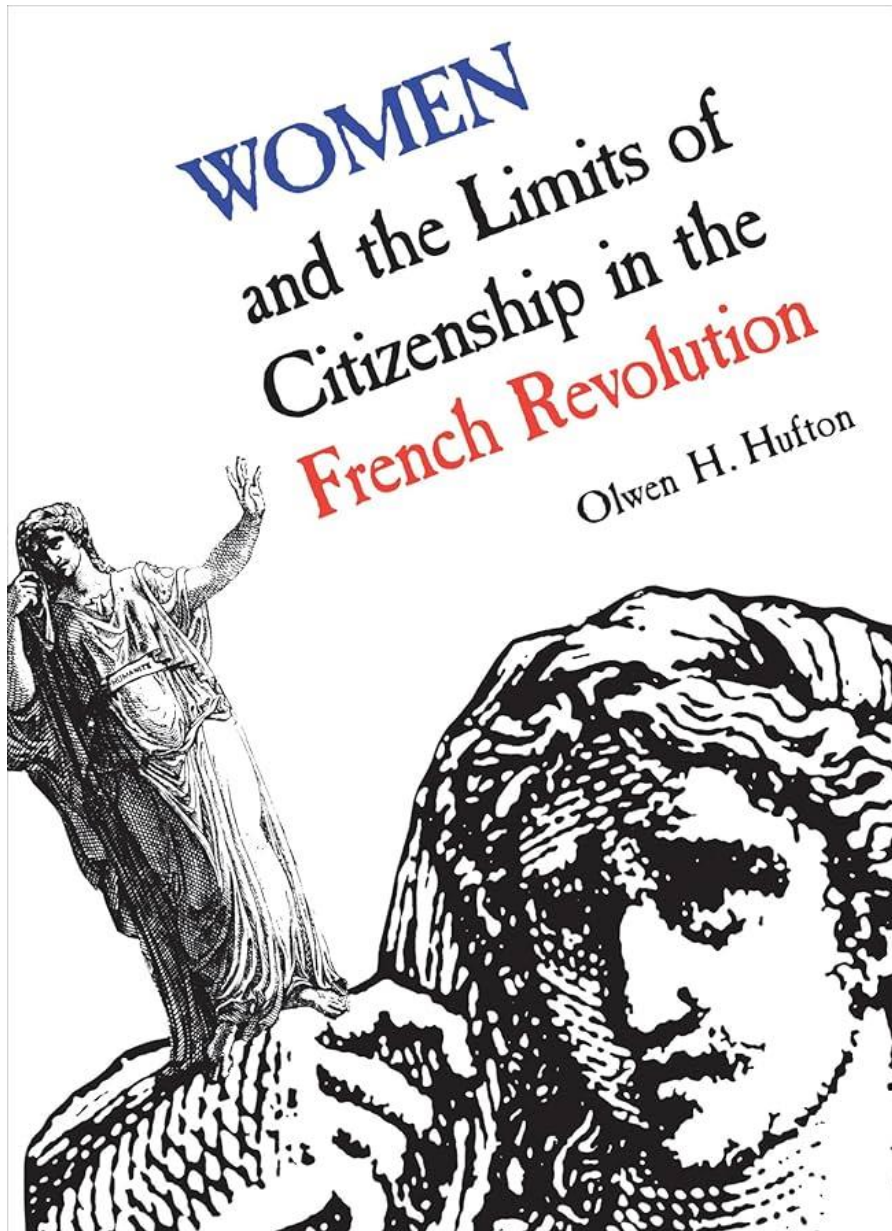
French revisionism

- Furet and Richet (1966) – Revolution had ‘skidded off course’ into terror
- Denounced by adherents of the traditional view as undermining Revolution’s unity and purpose.
- Furet’s later work (1970s) – not a ‘skidding off course’, terror inherent from the beginning.
- Furet inspired by de Tocqueville’s questions about liberty. Revolution intolerant to opposition.
- Traces origins of modern totalitarianism to 1789-1794.

Cultural history



- Cultural explanations – tracing discourses emerging from political contestations of 1770-1789.
- Drew on Habermas – importance of public opinion.
- Emergence of revolutionary political culture – journals, newspapers, pamphlets, books, discussion of ideas in coffee shops and salons (Baker, 1990; Kennedy, 1989)
- Studies of revolutionary festivals (Ozouf, 1976); exhibitions (Crow, 1985); impact of print (Darnton and Roche, 1989).
- How far did revolutionary culture mobilise the peasantry and the poor? Were political ideas translated into concrete action?



Newer avenues...

- Interest in role of women in the Revolution (Hufton, 1992; Landes, 1988; Abney, 1975)
- Provincialising the revolution – studies of events outside Paris (Forrest, 1996; Markoff, 1985)
- Globalising the revolution – events in the Empire (Sutherland, 2008; Covo and Maruschke, 2021).
- Rosenfeld (2019) – contemporary challenges to democracy in Europe, the US and elsewhere will lead to new questions.

Thursday: Transatlantic Slavery

- Take a look at the SlaveVoyages website
- Read the linked chapter, and the primary source.