

# Topic Page: [French Revolution](#)

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Definition: **French Revolution** from *The Macquarie Dictionary*

the movement that, beginning in 1789, overthrew the absolute monarchy of the Bourbons and the system of class privilege, and ended in the seizure of power by Napoleon in 1799.

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Summary Article: **French Revolution** from *Encyclopedia of Global Studies*



Image from: **Women helping the injured during the French Revolution, engraved by Labrousse, c.1795 (coloured engraving)** in *The Bridgeman History of Science*

The French Revolution has made an impact on global history. The revolution of 1789 was one of the most prominent elements in historical master narratives. On the one hand, it was presented as the origin of modern Western democracy and of a political culture based on human rights, the principle of people's sovereignty guaranteed by a constitution, and the centrality of private property. On the other hand, Marxist interpretations saw the event occurring between the storming of the Bastille and Maximilien Robespierre's Committee of Public Welfare, and concluded that it was an initial important step toward the definitive emancipation of humanity from exploitation and therefore a model for modern revolution. Not by accident, Bolsheviks in Russia view themselves as the Jacobins of the 20th century, and many more revolutionaries in the world since the French Revolution have made a reference to the ideals of 1789.

## Diverse Perspectives on the Significance of the French Revolution

Because the French Revolution produced metaphors for subsequent political constellations, it is no wonder that the memory of 1789 was polarized politically for almost two centuries. François Furet, a French historian who declared in the 1980s that the peripety of revolutionary history in France was complete, found himself discredited by the enormous mobilization that characterized the anniversary in 1989. President François Mitterrand invited, on the eve of the anniversary of the storming of the Bastille, his colleagues from Africa, Latin America, and Asia to demonstrate how alive the revolutionary message was. Correspondingly, many commentators took the revolutions of the same year as a new chapter in that history of freedom and democracy that was opened in 1789.

Positioning the French Revolution primarily at the origin of a diffusionist scenario is based on internal accounts; at the same time, the cause of the outbreak of the revolution was investigated mainly either from the short-term perspective regarding the food crisis at the time or from a long-term perspective that focused on gradually increasing forms of social confrontation. In both cases, the perspective is largely from within France. Accordingly, the former concerned the grain supply mainly in cities, whereas the latter considered the increasingly economically successful middle classes looking for political representation and a bigoted majority of nobles and clergymen unwilling to contribute to the country's expenses. The only attempt to overcome this limitation of French affairs was Robert Palmer and Jacques Godechot's interpretation of an Atlantic revolution that linked the American and French revolutions into a larger international pattern. Whereas this portrayal was popular in the United States, it was never successful in France because it was seen as a discourse legitimatizing the North Atlantic Treaty Organization alliance, which was not very popular among French leftist intellectuals.

## The Global Consequences of the French Revolution

Whereas the causation of the revolution was located in France's internal developments, the consequences of it were identified at a global level. The echo of the revolution was investigated by many scholars, and the most radical followers worldwide were seen as revolutionary Jacobins. Although these revolutionaries shared the agenda of the club in 1792, they were by no means as radical as the Robespierrists were in France from 1793 to 1794 owing to the fact that they never had the necessary popular support in their respective countries. Another consequence, directly related to the many contemporary comments on what was transpiring in France, is a new political language that allowed transforming the understanding and the communication of politics not only in France but almost all across the globe. Furthermore, the Napoleonic Wars play a central role within that narrative of global consequences of the revolution of 1789, resulting in Egypt, Saint-Domingue, Italy, Spain, and Russia being confronted by French troops and accompanying civilians representing the French ambition to measure the world for both intellectual and military purposes. In the course of Napoleon's expansionist campaigns, sister republics emerged in Switzerland, in the Rhineland, in the Netherlands, and in Italy, with Napoleon later offering his marshals and brothers parts of the occupied territories as dependent kingdoms of the French Empire. The expedition to Egypt in 1798 targeted not only the margins of the already weakened Ottoman Empire but was also part of a worldwide competition with Britain, a campaign that led Napoleon to attempt—and in the end fail—to block British products from entering the entire European continent. While some proto-industrial regions in Europe profited to a great degree from this temporary protectionism, France was not able to win the economic and military competition with Britain, even after 15 years of substantial transformation of European social and political landscapes.

This intense impact of French ideas and the presence of French armed forces in countries not only in the geographical neighborhood of France but also as far away as India, as well as in northern Africa and the Americas, can be seen as the first chapter of the long influence of that revolution; a multitude of societies followed in referring to the legacy of 1789 and/ or 1793. Leftist, liberal, and right-wing intellectuals of the 19th century, through their social theories, were occupied by the question if one could expect a revolution similar to the one the world had seen in 1789 and what would be the consequences of such a perspective. The search for plausible causation of the French Revolution—either to prevent or to promote a renewal—promoted the comparative analysis of societies and strengthened the internalist accounts of the revolution itself.

Although historians debated the “success” of the revolution in terms of economic performance and social transformation, most of them agreed that the nation-state started its career through the transformations of the French Revolution as a model for societal self-organization as based on equal rights of men and sovereignty of the people. Given this assumption, there are no doubts that this nation-state would be the appropriate framework for the interpretation of the revolution itself. The French Revolution—which is often described as the most global event in these narratives—therefore became, ironically enough, a privileged case for methodological nationalism.

The global reach of the French Empire was, in this perspective, not very apparent. As a consequence, although the colonial aspect of the empire was not entirely neglected, it played only a minor role as a subordinate chapter in the heroic story of the revolution. French planters from the Caribbean, who joined the counterrevolution during the first year of the revolution, and a parliament deciding to abolish the slave trade, and later on slavery, are the only prominent themes in this regard. Only in recent years did Saint-Domingue—where the first and only successful revolution by slaves occurred since the beginning of the 1790s—attract more interest. However, with Saint-Domingue, the French Revolution is

connected to the heart of the already established globalized economy of the 18th century. Sugar production in large plantations used forced labor from African slaves, thereby guaranteeing fabulous profits not only for a small planter oligarchy but also for the French crown. At the same time, Saint-Domingue became a part of the French Empire that was increasingly difficult to defend. Geography played a role for the reason that the island was divided into two sections: one owned by the French and the other by the Spanish. This allowed the British colonial powers an opportunity to intervene and to disturb the otherwise unhindered profits of the colonial economy. Demography played a role as well since Saint-Domingue was the island with the highest concentration of African slaves compared to the number of White settlers and mulattos. Colonial administration was consequently more difficult in Saint-Domingue than in other places, not the least because French planters were so wealthy and powerful that they looked for partial emancipation from the over-bureaucratized French rule over the island. The colony, consequently, became a plausible candidate for the explosion of unrest as well as social and racial confrontation.

It was therefore logical that the French crown tried to use the opportunity of the North American war for independence to strengthen its position in the region, to weaken its English competitor, and to win new allies. Although the victory of the American settlers over Great Britain influenced the geopolitical situation in the Americas, France had paid a high price for its support of George Washington's army by overstressing its financial capacities. When Louis XVI accepted the Third Estate—with its double representation compared to the nobility and clergy of the General Estates convened at Versailles on May 1, 1789—a certain point of no return surfaced. What seemed necessary to solve the state crisis, caused by the increasing debt, had its origin in the engagement in the Americas some 15 years before. At this time, the French Empire was not able and willing to retire from its colonial possessions, while at the same moment the financial burden became increasingly incriminating and the old elite refused to accept a redistribution of taxation.

In that perspective, the French Revolution was much less a first experience at the beginning of a new age than another chapter in a long series of adjustments of domestic politics to the needs of imperial structures. The so-called gunpowder empires in the Middle East and in South Asia were probably the first that were confronted at the beginning of the 18th century by social transformations and geopolitical challenges caused by local rulers and European companies. As a result, they tried to redefine the balance of centralization and decentralization. Similarly, the Seven Years' War in the middle of the century, being waged across India, Europe, and North America, as well as the war of independence in the 1770s, were elements of that world crisis where old imperial structures were under stress and had to modernize in order to survive. Moreover, the so-called enlightened absolutism in Spain and Portugal developed a similar program of administrative reforms in their colonies in Latin America.

Instead of reducing the global reach of the revolution to its echoes and consequences, one can also claim that the French revolutionaries profited from the experience of their predecessors. It is therefore interesting not only to see how other societies echoed the message of 1789 but to analyze more in depth how the French made use of the failures of revolutionaries, for example, in Geneva and in Switzerland, to develop their understanding of the relationship between state and society, of direct and representative democracy, of popular sovereignty, and of the executive power of the monarch.

While the origins of the revolution can be understood as part of a global crisis, the revolution itself was also part of a cycle of similar revolutions connecting both sides of the Atlantic. Undeniably, Saint-Domingue was far from being only an auxiliary chapter to the French Revolution. The rebels under Toussaint L'Ouverture seized control of the island from the French as early as 1791, which influenced the

outcome in France as much as the French influenced the former slaves' room to maneuver. Nonetheless, this was not the only connection between the continents. Power relations within the Iberian Peninsula became so destabilized by the French-British competition that the Lisbon court decided to move to Rio de Janeiro. There they ran the Portuguese Empire from its former margins while Spain, occupied by Napoleon's troops, was no longer able to hold control over the Creolian elite in Central and South America. The resulting independence throughout Latin America became an important factor for the outbreak of the liberal revolutions in the early 1820s in southern Europe.

This transatlantic cycle of revolutions—based on the enormously increasing circulation of ideas and the mobility of political elite—became possible owing to the previously mentioned global crisis that created a situation whereby the world became more and more integrated. The old patterns of imperial structures were no longer appropriate to secure this integration, and a search for new political forms began. The French Revolution, therefore, became a part of a global moment that was much larger than France or the French Empire. For these reasons, it invites historical comparison with global moments later in the 19th and 20th centuries, where local events became synchronized in the same way the transatlantic revolutionary cycle brought about individual upheavals on both sides of the ocean.

### **See also:**

American Revolution, Civil Rights, Empires, Modern, Human Rights, International, Independence Movements, Revolutions, Universalism

### **Further Readings**

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Middell, Matthias

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