

Definition: **Louis XVI** from *The Macquarie Dictionary*

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1754--93, king of France from 1774; grandson of Louis XV; deposed in 1792, guillotined, with his wife Marie Antoinette, in 1793.

Summary Article: **Louis XVI, king of France**

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

1754–93, king of France (1774–92), third son of the dauphin (Louis) and Marie Josèphe of Saxony, grandson and successor of King Louis XV. In 1770 he married the Austrian archduchess Marie Antoinette. His early attempts to enact reforms and to appoint competent and upright ministers met with general approval, but his character was unsuited to provide the leadership needed to control the complex social and political conflict smoldering in France. Shy, dull, and corpulent, he preferred the hunting field and his locksmith's workshop to the council chamber; indecisiveness made him subject to the poor advice of his intimates.

The reforms begun by his able ministers A. R. J. Turgot and Chrétien de Malesherbes were opposed by the court faction, including Marie Antoinette. A more important obstacle to Turgot's plans was the opposition of the parlements, which were revived after the dismissal of René de Maupeou. Turgot was dismissed in May, 1776, and Louis appointed (Oct., 1776) Jacques Necker director of the treasury. The king supported most of Necker's reforms and economies, but the costly French intervention in the American Revolution more than canceled the savings, and Necker's borrowing greatly swelled the debt. Necker's attempt to gain greater control over policy by courting public opinion was rebuffed at court, and he resigned in protest in May, 1781.

Necker's successors, Charles Alexandre de Calonne (1783–87) and étienne Charles Loménie de Brienne (1787–88), were unable to ward off bankruptcy. When the interest-bearing debt had risen to a huge figure, the king convoked (1787) the Assembly of Notables and asked their consent to tax the privileged classes. The notables made a few minor reforms but refused to consent to taxation, referring this to the States-General.

Louis finally convoked the States-General in 1789. Necker, restored in 1788, prevailed upon Louis to double the number of deputies from the third, or popular estate. This increase, however, would be meaningless if the estates met separately and voted as units rather than as individuals; the nobles (first estate) and the clergy (second estate), could still outvote the third estate. The king's opposition to the combined meeting of the estates and his procrastination on this issue led the third estate to proclaim itself a National Assembly, thus signaling the end of absolutism in France. Louis ordered the estates to meet and vote separately, but he was forced (June 27, 1789) to yield and allow the estates to sit together and vote by head.

Shortly afterward Louis sent troops to Paris, where he suspected the French Guards of being too sympathetic to the assembly. Rumors circulated that the king intended to suppress the assembly, and the dismissal of the popular Necker provoked the storming of the Bastille (July 14, 1789). Louis again

had to capitulate; he ordered the withdrawal of the royal troops, reinstated Necker, and accepted the new national red, white, and blue cockade. Despite his outward acceptance of the revolution, Louis allowed reactionary plotting of the queen and court, and in August refused to approve the abolition of feudal rights.

In Oct., 1789, a crowd marched on Versailles and forced the royal family to return to Paris, where they were confined in the Tuileries palace. Louis's position, further compromised by the plots of émigré circles, was definitively ruined when the royal family attempted (June, 1791) to flee France in disguise. They were apprehended at Varennes, and their attempted flight was considered proof of their treasonable dealings with foreign powers. Louis was forced to accept the constitution of 1791, which limited his power, but preserved the royal veto and his power to appoint ministers.

After his return he was in communication with Austria and Prussia, urging them to rescue him. In 1792 the early reverses of the French army in the war with Austria and Prussia and the duke of Brunswick's threat to destroy Paris if the royal family were harmed infuriated the Paris sans-culottes. The king and his family were imprisoned in the Temple (Aug 10, 1792). In September, simultaneously with the defeat of the Prussians at Valmy, the Convention declared a Republic. Incriminating evidence against Louis was later found, and he was tried (Dec.–Jan.) by the Convention. Found guilty by a unanimous vote, he was sentenced to death by a vote of 361 to 288, with 72 calling for a delay. He was guillotined on Jan. 21, 1793, facing death with courage.

See biographies by S. K. Padover (new ed. 1963) and B. Fay (tr. 1968);

Walzer, M. , *Regicide and Revolution: Speeches at the Trial of Louis XVI* (1974);.

Jordan, D. , *The Trial of Louis XVI* (1980).

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