When King Louis XVI ascended to the throne in 1774, he inherited a kingdom in the midst of social, economic, and political upheaval. The past thirteen years before his coronation saw what historians continuously name a ‘quasi-revolution.’[[1]](#footnote-1) The main conflicts arose within the relationship between the parlements and the King’s ministers. The result was Louis XV, the grandfather of Louis XVI, abolishing them altogether in 1771. One of King Louis XVI’s first priorities upon assuming the throne was to see the parlements restored. This King wished to be of a different kind than his grandfather was. However, reality would prove ironic over the next 14 years as King Louis XVI started to exhibit similar pressures from his subjects and the parlements. The parlements were “corporate bodies, each acting as a supreme court of law for its part of the country, and asserting the power to verify sent to them before enforcing them in the courts.”[[2]](#footnote-2) The goal of the parlements during the years leading up to the culmination of the violent French Revolution following 1789 was to bring awareness to unfair advantages taken by the government, which led to abuses of power. They stood for the defense of “the whole hierarchic and corporate structure of French society.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

An ever-growing economic and agricultural crisis led to dangerous animosity being built up against the King and his ministers, largely due to the inefficiency of those appointed to try and help ease the burdens. King Louis XVI did try to appoint leaders who he felt would bring change to France, such as Turgot and Necker. Turgot turned out to be a terrible choice due to his long-standing ties to the nobility. He had big plans for France, which included curbing “the royal absolutism by associating the administration with the country, through provincial assemblies in which property-ownership, not legal, class, should be the basis of representation.”[[4]](#footnote-4) He also fought for Protestant toleration. Necker came after Turgot, who dealt with added pressures following France’s involvement in the American Revolution, which further increased the economic struggles throughout the nation. He tried to fight the debts by establishing new tax regulations and using loans to pay off war debts. He would accomplish little. Calonne, Necker’s successor, came the closest to actually pulling off what he initially suggested upon taking office. First, though, he realized that by appealing to public opinion, he might be able to gain more support from the masses than did Turgot and Necker. Public opinion was precarious in these days, and the strong ideas of the varying social classes and legal orders are what laid ground for the start of a physical revolution in France. Eventually, the building pressures erupted into radicalism.

By 1789 “the parlements had publicized the need for a constitution, for public participation in government, and for security for individual rights.”[[5]](#footnote-5) What really mattered was that both community, nobility, and the government felt that something in France had gone seriously wrong. The summer of 1789 proved to be a catalyst for the start of the subsequent wars and Reign of Terror that would plague France in the 1790s. On July 14, 1789 the first stages of military force and the resulting violence showed up with the storming of the Bastille by French troops on order by the King. The past few months had been tense as the Third Estate began arguing that they had the means to constitute as their own nation. All of a sudden fears of conspiracy were ripe within France. However, it is noted by Roswell that these fears had some credibility. He cites that due to action of the parlements, hesitancy of the government during the rise of the Third Estate, propaganda produced and distributed by nobles, and the eventual “locking out” of the Third Estate; it no longer seemed absurd to fear military reaction from the king. On July 11, after ousting Necker, King Louis XVI realized the fears of the Third Estate and many more from the Estates General by showing that he “planned to use force to disband” the assemblies that had gathered in order to protest what was happening in the French government.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Going into the Autumn months, the French countrymen and parlements took a page from the American’s book on revolutionizing: they drafted a ‘Declaration’ of their own, much in the same way the 13 colonies had petitioned for independence from Great Britain. This document was titled “Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen.” Its purpose “was to raise a highly visible standard, to hold and rally a country aroused by the uprisings of preceding weeks, to keep alive the sense of struggle toward a goal, pending the long and disputatious process of constitutional and institutional change.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Most importantly, Roswell notes, is that the declaration was a “direction of intention, advertising to the country and to the world the shape that the new laws were to have. It was an ethical affirmation.”[[8]](#footnote-8) All of this, from the time of King Louis XIV onward through the beginning of the 19th century, of course stemmed from the ideas purported by the Enlightenment. More people were becoming aware of ‘ideas’ and how things such as philosophy held certain rank in intelligent discussions about the state of humanity and civilization in advancing societies such as France. As more of the general masses became aware of the innerworkings of the social, political, and economic worlds they were part of, the people in turn realized that they had the right to voice opinions when they felt they were being wronged or taken advantage of by their government. No longer were citizens willing to blindly follow authority, and that, truly, is where the kindling for the French Revolution, and others like it, such as those in America and Russia, were truly ignited. This awareness led the people of France to start viewing their country as one under the control of a despot and as a result, King Louis XVI became public enemy number one. He would be executed in January 1793.[[9]](#footnote-9)

War was brought down on France by the beginning of the 1790s, and in 1793 and 1794 the Reign of Terror became a cruel and frightening reality for the people of France. It seems that the continuous rise in violence since 1789 instilled a sense of emergency into government officials. The “Terror,” therefore was seen simply as swift justice. Thousands and thousands were sentenced to death during this time. The Reign of Terror lead to the establishment of a new constitutional monarchy. The most important aspects of the new constitution were the abolishing of nobles as being part of a legal order, restricted voting rights, and tighter veto power granted to the King, which would only be temporary. Most important, all power was under the direction of legislative assemblies.[[10]](#footnote-10)

As the 18th century began drawing to a close, the French Army had began garnering a reputation of near-invincibility. Then, finally in 1799, multiple threats from countries such as Britain, Austria, and Russia gave cause for concern. The result was the return of Napoleon Bonaparte, an experienced soldier who had been campaigning in Italy for a number of years prior. Bonaparte led French troops into Egypt, which Bonaparte felt would both gain them new allies and undermine British trading power at the same time. This would only be the start of many successful military campaigns with the French.

In 1802 France saw peace for the first time since at least 1789, through the Treaty of Amiens. Doyle states that somehow the “Republic made no substantial concessions at all,” under the terms through which peace was achieved in this treaty and others.[[11]](#footnote-11) Peace meant that new order was brought into effect by Bonaparte. After using the Revolution to gain power and support from the French people, he set out to transform the Republic into something more akin to a military dictatorship, which he would helm until his 1815. His goal was to make it so that royals no longer held absolute strength in government and legislative decision making. He “wanted to use military victory until it consolidated his power…he had every interest in neutralizing monarchist opinion.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

The French Revolution began because widening prosperity ensured widening education of the masses. As more became educated, “loss of public confidence underlay the financial and political crisis which precipitated the downfall of a system of government too little changed in its habits and priorities of Louis XIV.”[[13]](#footnote-13) It was these ideas and loss of confidence in the government and monarchy that led to the first seeds of violent resistance from the nobility all the way to the peasants. What the Revolution represented was a cultural transformation above all else. Little was changed in terms of agriculture or materialism. In fact, many were worse off after the Revolution ended than they were before when they first began fighting for reform. “The writers of the Enlightenment, so revered by the intelligentsia who made the Revolution, had always believed it could be done if man dared to seize control of their own destiny.”[[14]](#footnote-14) People became swept up in the idea that “the people are sovereign” and since the Revolution began in the time of Louis XIV “it has conquered the world.”[[15]](#footnote-15) The results of the French Revolution going into the 19th century, and the reign of Emperor Napoleon, was that more would die under the new regime on top of those who already sacrificed their lives during the wars of the 1790s. The Enlightenment thinkers certainly encouraged the masses to think more for themselves and to take control of their own lives and futures, but they got so hooked on the ideas that they “failed to see” that “reason and good intentions were not enough by themselves to transform the lot of humanity.” Post-Revolutionary France would see these consequences unfold for a quarter century after the wars were brought to a peaceful end. In essence, as proclaimed by Doyle, “the prospect of the French Revolution…is also in every sense a tragedy.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

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1. 1 Robert Roswell. *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760-1800.* Princeton University Press. 1959-64. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. IBID., pg. 449. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. IBID., pg. 451. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. IBID., pg. 450. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. IBID., pg. 472. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. IBID., pg. 482. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. IBID., pg. 486. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. IBID., pg. 486. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. William Doyle. *The Oxford History of the French Revolution.* Oxford University Press. 2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Robert Roswell. *The Age of the Democratic Revolution.* Ch. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
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12. IBID., pg. 382. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. IBID., pg. 393. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. IBID., pg. 425. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. IBID., pg. 417. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. IBID., pg. 425. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)