

French Revolution 1790

Crisis Background Guide



LFMUNC I

Background Guide

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Introduction

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way – in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only. (Tale of Two Cities, pg.1, ch.1, Charles Dickens)”

The French Revolution, as famously described by Charles Dickens in his novel, *The Tale of Two Cities*, could easily be discerned as that of although having a most infamous standing in the present, could also be put in the sense of revealing the people’s power against prejudice, tyranny, and the flawed law of the French aristocracy. When we first paint our scene in a France that is torn explicitly between the nobility and the common people, it is that of the relationship and power one holds over the other. As the tyranny of the French aristocracy had brought forth unjust taxes, unfair laws, and complete indifference to the well-being of the poor, it had fed the rage of the commoners into the events that would later follow: a revolution.

Before we proceed further, delegates, we must properly settle the definition of a revolution. By dictionary definition, a revolution is described as “a forcible overthrow of a government or social order, in favor of a new system”. As highlighted in specific key points in history, it could be rightfully justified as this in its simplest definition: the American Revolution, for example, had taken place a few years before the French revolution -- and as it had started with the colonists’

protest against the rule of the British monarchy, it, therefore, ended with the separation of the new country from the English crown and the mark of a new establishment of a government. In the events leading up to the citizen's outrage, it could be properly discerned that the idea of liberty and a more perfect government of the French people could, be that of stemming from its predecessor.

The Spark of Revolution:

The 18th century came to a close with France's costly involvement in the American Revolutionary War. Not only had the royal coffers been drained, but the common people were also enraged -- having gone through two decades of drought, disease, and skyrocketing taxes, the American revolution's ideas could have stood at nothing next to many's expression of desperation to a regime that imposed unjust and high taxes, with little to no relief to come out of it. In autumn of 1786, King Louis XVI's controller general, Charles Alexandre de Calonne, proposed a financial reform plan -- that of which would no longer exempt the nobility. In accordance with this proposal, Louis XVI had then summoned the Estates-General (*les états généraux*), an assembly representing the three Estates of France: the clergy, nobility, and the middle class. However, even as the Third Estate's non-aristocratic members totaled up to be 98% of France's total population, they could be easily outvoted by the remaining two Estates, both of whom could do so in opposition of the Third Estate's represented ideas.

As seen by the Third Estate, representation was widely disproportional in correspondence with the general population. Having their efforts for reform constantly overruled by the other two Estates, the Third Estate decided to form their own *National Assembly*, which included the

renowned Maximillien Robespierre and Georges Danton. On *June 20, 1789*, Louis XVI ordered the closure of the *Salle des États* where the Assembly met. The Third Estate then proceeded to a nearby indoor tennis court where they pledged not to separate until they had given France a constitution. This became known as the Tennis Court Oath, or, in French, *Serment de Jeu de Paume*.

The National Assembly continued to gather in discussion and colloquy, however, they did so now in a France that may then have been encompassed in an overwhelming sense of fear. Not only did they worry about the increase of nearby military presence, the aristocracy's worry for their own safety due to the people's show of anger had put them in a difficult position as well. With Louis XVI's dismissal of popular finance-director Jacques Necker, who had been the most sympathetic to the Third Estate's struggle, the people interpreted this as the symbol of the king's attempt to shut down the National Assembly and therefore responded by storming the fortress *Bastille* on July 14, 1789. The Bastille fell soon later, and therefore raised alarm to Louis XVI, who immediately retrieved his troops and recalled Jacques Necker.

On August 26, 1789, the Assembly published the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, a charter of human liberties, described as stated in its preamble, "The representatives of the French people...believing that the ignorance, neglect, or contempt of [man's rights] are the sole cause of public calamities...have determined to set forth in a solemn declaration the natural, unalienable, and sacred rights of man¹..", approved and then proclaimed France a constitutional monarchy upon its coming into effect on September 20, 1791. King Louis XVI's power was now

¹ National Assembly of France. "Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen", *yale.edu*, Yale Law School, 1789, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/rightsof.asp

reduced to that of a figurehead, and was forced to swear an oath to the constitution. The National Assembly was then dissolved and replaced by a Legislative Assembly.

However, the people of France were still restless. As months of bad harvest continued to cause market prices to skyrocket and leaving many hungry, a large crowd of protesters, mostly women, gathered on October 5th, 1789, to march from Paris to the king's residence in Versailles, gathering more support along the way. They stormed the palace, intending to kill the Queen, who had earlier escaped through a secret passage, and demanding an audience with the king to "live among the people". After several royal guards were killed, Louis XVI, immediately consented, retreating with the crowd back to Paris and now legitimizing the Legislative Assembly's power.

Opening the Scene in 1790 France:

The fragility and flaws of the French law have now been revealed; to proceed now is to do so with calculation and a goal in mind that is to be set by one's own character.

Having now detailed the events that have led up to this current situation, one could look to the possible future as well; if history and fate follows the original timeline, a few further events of the revolution would likely proceed as follows:

May 19, 1790: National Assembly abolishes the nobility.

June 20-21, 1791: Marie Antoinette and King Louis XVI attempt to flee to the border, and are caught.

April 25, 1792: First use of the guillotine in public execution

January 21, 1793: King Louis XVI, found guilty, is publicly executed by guillotine.

October 16, 1793: Marie Antoinette found guilty and publicly executed by guillotine.

September 5, 1793 - July 28, 1794: Reign of Terror; ended with the execution of Maximillien Robespierre.

November 9-10, 1799: In a coup d'état, the five directors were ousted and replaced by three "consuls": the famous military leader Napoleon Bonaparte; director Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès; and politician Roger Ducos.

However again, when we open the scene as of the current situation in the committee, we can see a France outlined in rage, instability, and uncertain future. Rather, it can be stated that the peace has long been shattered, but to some extent, it must still be questioned. To take on history and rewrite what has long been set in stone is a choice to be taken by delegates -- the events that could follow could easily be broken -- or shifted. Reform may be along the corner, or peace to accompany it, but tread lightly -- the course of history is always that of a strict plot -- and to change one element, will undoubtedly shake all the rest to its core.

Questions to consider:

1. In resolving possible riots or pushing to governmental reform, what is your character's goal for France as a whole?
2. In the face of a revolution, how will you, as your character, change your fate?
3. Who are those you can trust and those you can cooperate with?
4. What is reform and trust? And how can you, in your character's position, reclaim that for both France and yourself?

Background Guide written by Megan Zhang

Committee roles:

- Marie Antoinette (*Queen of France, of Austrian descent*)
- Louis XVI (*King of France*)
- Napoleon Bonaparte (*French military and political leader*)
- Charles Alexandre de Calonne (*French statesman*)
- Jean Jacques Rousseau (*philosopher of the Enlightenment, influenced Revolution ideas*)
- Charles, baron de Montesquieu (*French political philosopher*)
- Marquis de Lafayette (*French military officer*)
- Maximilien Robespierre (*French lawyer, statesman*)
- Georges Danton (*French statesman*)
- Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord (*French clergyman*)
- Gabrielle, Duchess of Polignac (*French aristocrat, close friend of the Queen*)
- Axel Von Fersen (the Younger) (*Swedish-French soldier, diplomat, statesman*)
- Jacques Necker (*Minister of Finance*)
- Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès (*constitutional theorist*)
- Jacques-Pierre Brissot (*leading member of the Revolution*)
- Jean-Marie Collot d'Herbois (*French essayist and revolutionary*)
- Madame Chevalier d'Éon (*Close associate of King Louis XVI*)

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