

Abolition of Existing Institutions

The French Revolution transformed the social, political, and religious landscapes of late 18th century France. The abolition or weakening of several foundational institutions in France—including the Church, the aristocracy, and the monarchy—were among the Revolution’s most significant accomplishments.

In Ancien Regime France, the First Estate (the aristocracy) and the Second Estate (the Church) held political and social power. As the French clergyman and revolutionary political theorist Abbé Sièyes complained in his pamphlet, *What is the Third Estate?*: “[A]ll the branches of the executive have been taken over by a caste that monopolizes the Church, the judiciary and the army. A spirit of fellowship leads the nobles to favor one another in everything over the rest of the nation. Their usurpation is complete; they truly reign.” But on August 26, 1789, the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* attempted to end this “usurpation” by proclaiming that “the source of all sovereignty is located in the nation; no body, no individual can exercise authority which does not emanate from it expressly.”

The Church

The Revolution dealt a crippling blow to the power of the Roman Catholic Church that fundamentally altered its status in France. In the Ancien Régime, the Church was closely aligned with both the Absolutist state established by Louis XIV and the aristocracy. The Church was an exceedingly powerful institution both in cultural and economic terms. In the countryside, it dominated the everyday lives of most people. In addition to conducting and overseeing baptisms, marriages, and funerals, the Church shaped the rhythm and meanings of days and seasons with its liturgical calendar. At a material level, the Church was not only a significant landowner itself—it was also integral to the agricultural system dominated by the rural aristocracy. On the eve of revolution in 1789, most agricultural production was still rooted in medieval social relations. The Church played an important role in maintaining consent for this arrangement. In exchange, the Church was allowed to collect a percentage of each year’s harvest in the form of tithes (or land taxes).

The Revolutionaries were concerned with breaking the power and influence of the Church, and they managed to accomplish this goal through a variety of means. For example, the National Assembly abolished tithes in 1789, thereby relieving the peasantry of a burden that had claimed 5-10% of their annual production and deprived the Church of one of its primary sources of income. The campaign did not stop there: the Revolutionary State confiscated much of the Church’s land, which totaled about 20 percent of the area of France. In a move aimed as much at the aristocracy as at the Church, the National Assembly enacted the Civil Constitution of the Clergy a year later. This took the power of appointing Church offices away from the aristocracy and required the clergy to take an oath of allegiance to the state. The Revolutionaries went further still. Robespierre abolished the traditional calendar in 1792 in order to undermine the hold that the Church exercised over people’s imaginations through its control of the calendar and the meaning of its seasons and days. This control was basic to the Church’s social power.

With these and other, related actions, the French Revolutionaries forced the Church into submission and reduced the symbolic role of the Pope to that of a cultural and religious figurehead.

The Aristocracy

The aristocracy of the Ancien Regime was divided into two segments: the grand aristocrats, who spent much of their time at the court of the King (as they had since Louis XIV moved the center of royal power to Versailles in 1682), and the rural aristocracy, which dominated smaller landholding in the countryside. Since landownership was the main source of income for both, the distinction was largely a matter of wealth and prestige. What made landholding profitable were the rents and taxes that the aristocracy collected from its tenant farmers. These tenant farmers worked under the same arrangements that had been in existence for hundreds of years; the arrangements represented the last vestiges of feudalism in France, and they extended to all arable lands controlled by the aristocracy or the Church. The First and Second Estates controlled virtually all such land in 1789.

For rural France, the abolition of this feudal remnant was one of the most significant changes brought about by the French Revolution. In 1789, the Assemblée Nationale opened the way for fundamental transformations of property ownership and agricultural production in France. This made peasants into citizens of the French nation, who were able—and encouraged—both to vote in elections and own land. In conjunction with changes in tax collection procedures, this shift had a significant financial impact on the aristocracy. It did not, however, destroy the aristocracy. The abolition of feudalism opened a pathway to deep changes not only in French agriculture, but in the political and social lives of people in most of France.

The Monarchy

The adoption of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* initiated a basic change in the nature of French politics through its claim that sovereignty lay with the people (who collectively comprised the nation) rather than with the king. From this point forward, France was defined in principle by the democratic actions of its citizens. This conceptualization of the relationship between the nation and its people has remained a regulative idea despite the various turns that political life has taken since the Revolution. The decision to abolish the monarchy outright emerged after a series of misunderstandings and constitutional issues culminated in the creation of the First French Republic in September 1792. A few months after attempting to flee the country, Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette were executed.

The overthrow of the monarchy eliminated the main patronage system that had linked the King and the grand aristocracy at the court of Versailles. While this weakened the aristocracy, the more basic changes were instituted along with *Declaration of the Rights of Man*. In the Republic, social hierarchies were no longer based on birth; rather, social position and power came to be correlated with wealth and status. The transfer of sovereignty from the person of the King to the People—the Nation—was a watershed event. The attendant transfer of power from the aristocracy to the *demos* was no less transformative.

From Revolution to European War

With the end of the Ancien Regime, French revolutionaries sought to alter France's international position. They withdrew from the European system of states, an alliance of autocratic monarchs and entrenched nobles. The European powers saw the Revolution as a threat to the international system; the execution of Louis XVI extended the threat to monarchy itself as a form of government. The European powers allied and moved to crush the Revolution militarily. With that, the French Revolution was transformed from domestic upheaval to European war.

Saylor URL: www.saylor.org/hist303 Subunit 3.4.1

The Saylor Foundation



Saylor.org
Page 4 of 4