**DIRECTIONS: Read the following handout, identifying any important vocabulary, terms, names, and/or events that you think might be historically important. Write content notes in the margins next to the important text that will help you remember the information. You may wish to highlight or underline the important text.**

The debates over a new constitution took place in the assembly and among the public between 1789 and 1791. At the same time, the assembly had to conduct the day-to-day business of governing France.

All over France, people formed political clubs where they argued about the issues in front of the assembly. The clubs would write each other and affiliate themselves with a club in Paris. The most famous was the Jacobin Club, a pro-revolutionary reform group. It was not what today we would call an organized political party, but rather a coalition of like-minded individuals. It got its name from the Jacobin convent where it met. By July 1791, the Jacobin Club would have more than nine hundred affiliated clubs around France.

The assembly enacted reforms that changed all of the institutions of French government and reshaped much of life in France. While these political changes swept away much of the Old Regime, hunger and hardship for many French people remained. The financial crisis caused by great government debt also continued to plague the new government.

While King Louis XVI still sat on the throne, his power had been greatly diminished. He could no longer propose new laws and his salary was now set by the legislature. Using the idea of the separation of powers (an idea of the Enlightenment writer Montesquieu), the assembly decided the king could not select any of his ministers from the legislature.

**Revolutionary France**

On September 10, 1789, the assembly agreed that there would be a unicameral legislature in the new constitution. The assembly also voted 673-352 to give the king what was called a “suspensive” veto, which meant that the king could choose not to approve legislation. Only if the assembly passed the legislation three sessions in a row (a process that could take six years) would the legislation be enacted.

*How did the public react to the suspensive veto?*

This decision was not what the Parisian public wanted. Public anger about the decision, combined with the ever-present difficulty of buying bread, caused thousands of women to lead a march to Versailles on October 5. Joined by men along the way, the crowds invaded the palace and demanded that the king return to Paris with them.

The king and his family went to Paris in carriages escorted by a crowd of sixty thousand. The assembly decided a few days later to move the site of their meeting from Versailles to Paris as well. The power of the crowds of Paris continued to grow in importance.

*How did the assembly decide who could vote and participate in politics?*

On October 29, the assembly determined that only “active” citizens could vote. Active citizens were men over the age of twenty-five who paid a certain amount of taxes. This gave the vote to 4.3 million Frenchmen. (There were twenty-six million people in France.) The other category was so-called “passive” citizens who were entitled to civil rights, but not political rights of participation. For some, the distinction seemed to challenge the broad principles of equality spelled out in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen.

In December 1789, the assembly gave Protestants civil equality and refused to declare Catholicism as the state religion. (Jews were given full political rights in September 1791.) But continued tensions between Catholics and Protestants led to violence between the two groups in southern France. Although women were not given the right to vote, they continued to play an active political role during this period.

*How did the assembly reorganize France?*

The assembly also reorganized the administrative divisions in France. The provinces and généralités were replaced by eighty-three departments, all roughly equal in size. These were divided further into districts and communes. The central government would appoint no officials to govern. Instead citizens would elect their own local officials. The central government delegated a great deal of authority to local officials.

The assembly also created a national guard, disbanded the parlements,[[1]](#footnote-1) reformed the judicial system, and made trial by jury the standard. By all measures, France had become the most democratic European nation.

*How did the assembly try to change the Roman Catholic Church in France?*

On November 2, 1789 the assembly decided that the lands and properties owned by the Catholic Church in France belonged to the nation. They decided to sell these lands to help pay the government’s debts. This measure was controversial for many of France’s Roman Catholics. The assembly also made other decisions about the Catholic Church that heightened tensions within France and reduced popular support for the Revolution.

In July 1790, the assembly attempted to reorganize the church as it had reorganized the government. It enacted the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, which said priests and bishops would be elected by the people. It also reduced the authority of the pope in governing the Catholic Church in France. The pope rejected this as did many of the clergy because they believed it contradicted their beliefs. In response, in November 1790 the assembly insisted that priests take an oath of loyalty to the new government. About half of the clergy refused.

*How did the Civil Constitution of the Clergy reduce popular support for the Revolution?*

This issue would prove to be one of the most contentious and divisive matters of the Revolution. Pro-revolutionary “patriots” tried to force compliance with the oath. Those citizens who accepted the sacraments from priests who had not sworn the  oath were labeled as disloyal to the Revolution. In contrast, some rural communities tried to prevent priests from taking the oath, which they saw as threatening their religious practices. Both sides  used threats and violence to intimidate opponents. Most people in France were Catholic and faced the dilemma of choosing between “constitutional”  clergy and the tens of thousands of priests who would not swear the oath.

The Civil Constitution of the Clergy caused a serious split in the French public and undermined support for the Revolution, particularly in rural areas of France. Two extremes developed. One saw the Civil Constitution of the Clergy as an attempt to destroy the church. The other saw priests who refused the oath as dangerous counter-revolutionaries (someone wants to reverse the results of a revolution).

*What did the assembly decide to do about slavery?*

Some of the Enlightenment philosophers and writers had condemned slavery and called for its abolition. A few groups seized on the opening words of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen: “Men are born free and remain equal in rights” and claimed that it should apply to all.

The majority of French people did not share the desire for the abolition of slavery. In fact, this radical idea had appeared in only a few of the lists of grievances. In March 1790, the assembly decided to exempt the colonies from the new constitution (and the rights it granted) and to make it a crime to support slave uprisings.

But the ideas of equality and liberty reached the colonies. On August 22, 1791, inspired by events in France, the enslaved people of Saint-Domingue revolted. A long bloody struggle began, which would last until January 1, 1804 when the new republic of Haiti claimed its independence from France.

**The Flight to Varennes**

The dramatic changes since 1789 had led to growing tensions and divisions in France. Throughout it all, the king had publicly supported the changes put in place by the National Constituent Assembly. Privately, he was deeply opposed to much of what had happened. In the midst of the Revolution, many French people had kept their affection for the king. This was about to change.

*Why did the king and his family want to escape from Paris?*

In April 1791, the king attempted to travel from Paris to his mansion in nearby St. Cloud. He hoped to be able to celebrate the Easter holiday with a priest who had not sworn the oath of loyalty to the new government. As he set out, crowds surrounded his carriage and refused to let him leave. He realized that he was essentially a prisoner in Paris. He and the queen decided that they needed to escape.

On June 21, 1791 the king and his family left Paris in the middle of the night in disguise. The king hoped to reach the fortified town of Montmédy where he would stop and rally the country against the revolution. When the king reached the town of Varennes, he was recognized and forced to return to Paris.

The king’s decision to flee Paris marked another important milestone in the revolution. It would strengthen radical voices hostile to the continued existence of the monarchy. It was really only after the flight to Varennes that significant numbers of people began to talk about the virtues of democratic and republican government.

*How did the public respond to the flight to Varennes?*

The king had left behind a letter when he had attempted his escape. The letter criticized the results of the revolution and worried about the threat of anarchy and unrestrained political freedom.

Prior to the flight to Varennes, many in France had retained some affection for the king. The discovery of the letter changed that. Radicals in the Jacobin Club, led by Maximilien Robespierre, began to call for a republic (a representative government without a king).

The king’s attempted flight and the public reaction shocked many in the assembly, which was still dominated by moderates. The assembly decided to retain the king, but his limited powers would be restored only after the constitution was completed and the king had accepted it. The assembly worked quickly to finish the constitution. The constitution now said that if the king left the country, retracted his oath to the constitution, or led a rebellion against France he would be removed from power.

On September 13, 1791 the king accepted the new constitution. He had little choice in the matter. The National Constituent Assembly had finished its work and disbanded on September 30. Its members agreed that they would not stand for election in the new legislative body that would replace the assembly.

**The Republican Revolution**

The National Constituent Assembly was replaced by the Legislative Assembly. Theirs was not an easy task either. French politics were polarized and delegates faced public discontent and suspicion. As the new assembly began to meet, they faced an immediate crisis: the threat of war.

There were reasons for worry about war. The king’s brothers had been busy trying to convince other rulers in Europe to invade France and restore the full authority of the French king. On August 27, 1791, the King of Prussia and Emperor Leopold II of Austria (Marie Antoinette’s brother) had issued a declaration that they would intervene in France if they were joined by other European powers. In truth, it was unlikely that other European powers would join them. Nevertheless, the Declaration of Pillnitz, as it was known, provoked great anxiety in France about counter-revolution and invasion by foreign powers.

There were other supporters of a counter-revolution. Many members of the nobility and two-thirds of the army’s officers, unhappy with the direction of the revolution, had fled France. These émigré groups also saw military intervention as a way to restore the authority of Louis XVI. The assembly decreed that émigrés who did not return to France would be punished with death. The king refused to agree to this and used the suspensive veto power given to him in the new constitution. The relationship between the new assembly and the king was not off to a good start.

*Who were the Girondists?*

A growing number of delegates to the assembly were distrustful of the king and fearful of counter-revolutionary plots. Many belonged to one faction in the assembly, an offshoot of the Jacobins known as the Girondists (named after the region of Gironde). The Girondists, led by Jacques-Pierre Brissot, began to call for war to protect the revolution from foreign intervention.

Both the king and Maximilien Robespierre believed that France’s disorganized army would be defeated in a war. Robespierre was the leader of a faction in the Jacobins known as “The Mountain” (because they sat so high in the assembly hall). Robespierre believed that war threatened the revolution and France. The king believed the same, but he saw it as his best hope for rescue. When the Legislative Assembly declared war on April 20, 1792, he was happy to go along with it. For most of the next twenty-three years, France would be at war with much of Europe.

*What were the consequences of war?*

The French armies were badly beaten in their first battles against the Austrian and Prussian forces. There were suspicions of treachery and counter-revolutionary plots within the army. The suggestions of some French generals to negotiate for peace were seen by many revolutionaries as treasonous and as part of a plan to restore the power of Louis XVI.

Fear and anger spread. Grain shortages and hunger persisted in making life difficult. The king continued to veto laws wanted by more radical revolutionaries. Growing crowds, made up of working class French people, took to the streets of Paris to protest the lack of political and economic progress. These groups were called the sans-culottes. (Sans-culottes means “without knee breeches.”) Knee breeches were the clothing of wealthier people; the sans-culottes usually wore long pants.) The sans-culottes tended to be fierce supporters of the most radical ideas of the Revolution. On June 20, 1792, crowds invaded the hall of the Legislative Assembly and threatened the king and his family in the Tuileries palace.

The French General Marquis de Lafayette (famous in the United States for his participation in the War for Independence) returned from the front and spoke to the assembly. He argued that the demonstrators needed to be punished and that the Jacobin Clubs and factions should be silenced. His actions increased distrust of the army among the public.

The commander of the Prussian armies issued a declaration saying that his war aims were to end anarchy in France and restore the king’s authority. He warned that if the king or his family were harmed, he would take revenge and Paris would be destroyed. The declaration, which was meant to frighten Parisians, instead strengthened their desire to resist the forces trying to restore the king’s power.

*Why did the sans-culottes attack the Tuileries Palace?*

The sans-culottes began to play an increasingly important role in this phase of the French Revolution. While members of the assembly debated how to respond to the threats and problems facing France, the sans-culottes took to the streets.

On August 10, 1792, twenty thousand sans-culottes and members of the National Guard attacked the king’s residence in Paris, the Tuileries Palace. The king had fled to the Legislative Assembly, but his guards were all killed - many hacked to death by the angry mob.

The assembly voted to suspend the monarchy. They also decided to disband themselves and called for elections for a new body to write a new constitution. The new assembly would be called the Convention. All men in France would be eligible to elect its members, even those who did not own property or pay taxes.

*What were the “September Massacres”?*

The advance of the Prussian army into France in the late summer of 1792 fueled panic. The Paris Commune (the city government) ordered drastic measures. Thousands suspected of being counter-revolutionaries were thrown in jail. In early September, the sans-culottes, believing more drastic measures were needed, removed more than one thousand prisoners from the Paris jails and executed them. This, they believed, would eliminate enemies of the revolution and prevent an uprising. Some of those executed were priests and nobles, but the majority were common criminals. A well-known radical journalist named Jean-Paul Marat wrote that the rest of France should follow the example of Paris and kill political prisoners.

After the executions, thousands of sans-culottes, who believed Paris was now safe from counter-revolution from within, streamed to the front to fight the invading Prussian army. Filled with patriotic enthusiasm, and outnumbering their opponent, they helped French forces win a decisive battle.

On September 22, 1792, the Convention met for the first time in Paris. It abolished the monarchy and declared France a republic. This was the beginning of the republican phase of the French Revolution. Universal suffrage for men meant that France was now the most democratic nation in the world.

Most members of the Convention were middle class professionals and lawyers who had developed their political beliefs in the Jacobin clubs. They wanted a republic that would listen and respond to the needs of the common people. Out of 750 members, only about 70 members of the Convention were nobles or clergy.

*What did the Convention decide to do with the king?*

One pressing issue facing the Convention was the question of what to do with the king. The Convention decided to put the king on trial for treason.

Two factions of the Convention disagreed on what should be done. Several hundred of the deputies made speeches or published their opinion about the fate of the king. The debate was heated.

One faction was the Mountain. Led by Maximilien Robespierre, it argued for the immediate execution of the king. For these deputies, the fates of the king and the Revolution were intertwined. The continued existence of this king, or any king for that matter, challenged their idea of the Revolution itself.

On the other side, the Girondists argued that the king had the right to a hearing and that the people of France should vote on the king’s fate. Some even suggested that he be exiled to the United States. The Girondists worried about the growing power of the sans-culottes and Parisian radicals.

The king defended himself by denying the charges against him. He claimed that he had not violated any laws. He also said that he had not knowingly shed any of his subjects’ blood. His lawyer questioned the appropriateness of the Convention in trying the King. He also argued that Louis had not been a tyrant, but someone who acted in the interest of the people.

On January 15, 1793, 683 deputies voted for a guilty verdict, none for acquittal. But the question of the king’s sentence continued to divide the Convention. The final vote was close (380-310), but the king was sentenced to death and taken to the guillotine (a machine that chopped off people’s heads) on January 21, 1793. Some historians believe that the threat of violence from the sans-culottes influenced the vote for execution.

The decision to execute the king shocked many people in France and raised the stakes for those who had voted for his execution. If the Revolution were to fail, or the government to fall, they would probably face trial and execution for killing the king.

*What was the reaction to the death of the king?*

The death of the king shocked the leaders of other European states as well. Spain and Great Britain declared war on France as did the Dutch Republic. The Convention decided to draft 300,000 new troops, a move that was unpopular and sparked popular resistance, particularly in the western and southern areas of France.

The king’s execution and the continued efforts to enforce the loyalty oath on Catholic clergy also created further divisions in France. In the west, in an area known as the Vendée, an armed group called the “Catholic and Royal Army” clashed with the National Guard and rebelled against revolutionary governmental authorities. This developed into a civil war.

Adapted and revised from “The French Revolution.” The Choices Program. Accessed January 12, 2015. <http://choices.edu/resources/detail.php?id=196>

1. France had thirteen *parlements* that served as the highest courts of law in the land. The king registered all new laws and edicts with the *parlements*; the *parlements* had the right to criticize these edicts, but ultimately could not overrule the king. The jurisdiction of these courts often covered multiple provinces and *généralités*, which often led to disputes over which laws should apply. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)